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of the

Association for Mormon Letters,

1996

Papers from 1994-95

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The style guide for the *AML Annual* is the current edition of the MLA Handbook, supplemented by the *Style Guide for Publications of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* for distinctive Mormon terms and uses.

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INTRODUCTION

This edition of the *Annual*, which collects papers given primarily in 1994 and 1995, continues for the second year the lecture of a visiting scholar. At the 1995 annual meeting, 13 January 1995 in Salt Lake City, Wayne C. Booth, a distinguished literary critic who made his career contributions at the University of Chicago, overcame the obstacles of a thunderous cold to deliver a multi-introduced paper in the baroque splendor of the Joseph Smith Memorial Building's Empire Room to an overflow audience. His paper carried into a second, more electronic generation, the schemings of Smoother, a demon assigned to afflict Mormon literati. Booth also participated in a panel discussion the next day as sessions continued at Westminster College on 14 January after three young scholars analyzed his critical contributions as they applied to Mormon literature.

A signal of the vitality of Mormon letters is the breadth of participation at the annual meeting. Of the nine papers excluding the presidential address presented at the annual meeting, six were by young scholars who were making first contributions to the Association for Mormon Letters: Grant Boswell, Robert Bird, Cheri Pray Earl, MaryJan Gay Munger, Eric Alden Eliason, Ariel Clark Silver, and David E. Sloan. These debut appearances are the beginnings, we hope of a long affiliation that will eventually match the decades of steady support and important insights shared by Marden Clark, whose "The Boon" provides reflections on a life lived in literature. Laura Bush and David E. Sloan, both of whom are also published in the *Annual* for the first time, had presented their papers at earlier sessions.

Papers presented but not submitted for publication include Dan Pearce "Mormon Guilt, Self-Mutilation, and Therapy in Levi Peterson's *The Backslider*" (1994), and "Civilization and Its Discontents: A Freudian Reading of Douglas Thayer's *The Red-Tailed Hawk*" (1995); Jean Ann Waterstradt, "The Relief Society Magazine: The Golden Years" (1994); and Patricia L. Coleman, "Religious Comedies of Manners: The Works of David Lodge and Neal Chandler."

The AML also sponsored a lively and provocative panel at the Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium in August 1994: "Eros in LDS Life and Literature," featuring Bruce W. Jorgensen as both moderator and participant, with Margaret Blair Young and Karin Anderson England. The panel presentations appear in this issue.

AML continued the tradition by sponsoring a session in the Sunstone Symposium, August 1995 in Salt Lake City, on Brian Evenson's controversial work, *Altmann's Tongue*, and the larger issues raised by conflict between literary works and social conventions. The panel, chaired by Marni Asplund, heard views from B. W. Jorgensen, Susan E. Howe, and Scott Abbott, with a response from Brian himself, who had announced only the month before that he would be taking a year's leave to teach in Oklahoma, probably not to return. These papers appear in this issue. Susan, whose 1995 presidential address, "The Moral Imagination," had presciently identified some of the critical ethical and literary issues in January, presented a paper in another session on May Swenson, the prize-winning poet with Mormon roots, with a response from May's brother, Paul Swenson, editor of Salt Lake City's *The Event*, who has himself begun publishing poetry in recent years.

At the conjoint meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters at the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, held 20 October 1995, in Spokane, Washington, three papers were presented in a session entitled "Perceptions of Mormons in Literature and the Media." Harlow Clark, faculty member at Utah Valley State College, wrote on "Prejudices of Publishers and Mormon Fiction"; Tessa Meyer Santiago, a faculty member at BYU and next year's session president to RMMLA, presented "'All Is Not Well in Zion': The Emergence of a Mormon Religious Grotesque"; and John Bennion, a member of BYU's English faculty and AML secretary-treasurer, presented "Renegotiating Scylla and Charbydis: A New Look at Insider and Outsider Stereotypes of Mormonism." These papers will be included in the 1997 *Annual*.

The Moral Imagination

Susan Elizabeth Howe

Though it may seem strange, I am going to begin my address to the Association for Mormon Letters by referring to the Holocaust. What is the possible relevance of that horror in Europe of the 1930s and 1940s to the practice of literature in contemporary Mormon culture? Or even to Mormon life? It is all too easy, considering our distance in time and space from World War II Europe, to deny any similarity between our late-twentieth-century-Wasatch-Front-Mormon selves and either the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, the Nazis and other Europeans who carried it out, or the thousands of respectable citizens who made it possible by not naming it evil and standing against it.

And yet our own religion should remind us that we are not so different; the Jews, Germans, Nazis, French, Italians, and Dutch are, indeed, our brothers and sisters. Only by denying this reality can we separate ourselves from them. We are like them in our bodies and in our spirits. What they have suffered, it is plausible that we might suffer; what they have done, it is plausible that we might do. Given the historical fact of the Holocaust, we human beings who have not experienced such atrocities owe it to those who have to learn something from their torture and destruction. It behooves us to consider any ways in which our cultural conditions might replicate those that enabled a highly educated Christian society to deliberately kill millions of people with so little sense of responsibility or remorse. And then we must fight those tendencies in ourselves and our culture.

For example, I think we should have learned from the Nazis that it is morally wrong to incite prejudice and persecution by labeling people as bad or inferior not on the basis of anything they've done but merely because of their membership in a certain group. Such actions justify otherwise decent people

in degrading and damaging individuals without ever actually seeing or knowing them; it is almost impossible to brutalize someone you recognize as a human being with qualities of goodness, dignity, and worth. It is wrong to so label *any* group of people—Jews, Native Americans, Hispanics, African Americans, conservative Mormons, liberal Mormons, gays, lesbians, feminists, or intellectuals.

And it seems to me a serious cultural weakness and absolute anathema to the gospel of Jesus Christ that so many Mormons, like so many 1930s Germans, are willing to turn over their powers of moral reasoning to their leaders. I cringe every time I hear someone say in church, "I'm so grateful that the General Authorities have spoken on that matter and now I can just do what they say." Isn't the lack of agency—choice and responsibility for choice—the reason that Satan's plan would not work in developing in us godlike capacities for learning principles of truth? And isn't that the reason Satan's plan was rejected? God has said:

I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have. (2 Nephi 28:30)

If we let someone else think for us, aren't we saying, in effect, "I'll use someone else's wisdom; I personally don't want any more"? Doesn't the scripture suggest that by saying that, one begins to lose the wisdom he or she already has? Are we not always responsible for working with the principles of truth presented to us by our leaders, for wrestling with them until we make them our own? It seems to me

that one can only become godlike by acquiring the attributes of God, and one of those attributes is the ability to distinguish between good and evil for oneself. To return to what we should have learned from the Holocaust, in a society in which the responsibility for individual moral choice is emphasized and valued, it is far less likely that a large number of people will carry out wholesale evil because they have excused themselves for their actions or their complicity by claiming that it is a greater good to follow a leader than to refuse to destroy human life.

A more explicit connection between my reflections on the Holocaust and Mormon letters lies in a review by Howard Ziff of two books (Wyman; Lipstadt) that asked how it was possible that "American reaction to the Holocaust was so slow and so ineffective. Why was there no universal outrage?" Ziff asks. "Why was an heroic rescue effort not mounted? Why were the Jews abandoned?" (97). Ziff claims that both books offer, in one way or another, the same answer:

The abandonment of the Jews was a failure of the moral imagination. It was a failure to act, of course, but . . . what documents tell by their very failure to tell, is the lack of a public rhetoric to *comprehend*, in the non-metaphorical sense of the word, what was happening. . . . For the larger, gentile community, . . . the picture [the books paint] is not one of immobilized horror, but more often of dumb incomprehension, again in the literal sense, an inability to hold the Holocaust steadily in mind and imagination. (98)

Ziff says that this failure is not a matter of ignorance but "of an imaginative poverty that carries with it a moral impoverishment" (98). Those individuals in the American press and the U.S. State Department who received information about the atrocities of the concentration camps, by reason of "their education, cultural background, religious sensibilities, social status, in short, their life worlds" (99), did not have the moral imagination to conceive of those who were being destroyed as actual human beings, like themselves, with tastes and feelings and joys and aversions. With whole, authentic lives.

It is that notion of a *moral imagination* that intrigues me. How might one define a moral imagi-

nation, and how might the concept be useful in the development of our literature?

Ziff's review suggests that a moral imagination is the mental and spiritual capacity to conceive of those outside one's own group as fully human and therefore deserving of full human rights and identity. In scriptural terms, a moral imagination might be the capacity to love one's neighbor as oneself. I think that there may be many other ways to consider a moral imagination that might also lead writers to better work, but right now I would like to discuss it as a corrective for an alarming trend I see in some contemporary American and Mormon literature.

I have been particularly distressed over the past few years at the brutality and violence in the work of some of our very most gifted writers. These writers include David Veloz, who wrote the screenplay of *Natural Born Killers*; Neal Labute, whose plays have been produced in Utah and the Midwest, and who won the 1993 AML Award in Drama for *In the Company of Men*; and Brian Evenson, author of *Altmann's Tongue* (New York: Knopf, 1994). But in criticizing the writing of these authors, I am not questioning their character; in fact, I know two of the three and have found them to be kind, generous, highly moral men and faithful Latter-day Saints. Furthermore, I find it ill-advised, if not morally repugnant, to attempt to force a writer to change his subject matter by threatening, for example, his employment. A writer can only write what is imaginatively alive for him, and only the writer can determine that. Attempting to censor a writer not only takes away his moral agency, it also gives the writer no room to maneuver and to change. Such an action also destroys the processes of discourse that bring about real learning and should always be allowed to operate in a genuine academic setting.

Writers like these three claim a moral purpose in using violence; after all, readers learn in recoil as well as they learn in identification. And the authors trust the morality of their readers; they expect the readers to bring to their engagement with the text the moral response that is excluded from the work, and rather than to copy the text's brutality, to back away from it.

I give these writers their intended moral purpose. If their work is read by an audience trained to

perceived as repugnant, and the audience will reject it. But a text is a cultural artifact as well as an aesthetic construct. As a text enters a culture, it may be appropriated by naive readers who share some of the assumptions of the brutal characters and use the text to justify their own brutality. Deconstruction teaches us that a text says several things at the same time. So even as a text presents a character and demonstrates to the reader that that character is depraved and repugnant, it also creates a fictional world that many readers see as corresponding to the conditions of the real world. If, in that fictional world, the only choices are to be a victim or a victimizer, most readers would rather be the aggressor. I found myself adopting this attitude as I read Brian Evenson's "The Munich Window." As I "entered" the story, I wanted to kill the narrator, a truly evil man who had sexually abused his daughter when she was a child and who, in the course of the story, murders her psychiatrist—also a woman—and brings about the daughter's death in the same way he had caused his wife to jump from a window with their second child eighteen years earlier. I wonder if my reading experience was morally useful to me: I wanted to see enacted on this man the violence he enacted on the other characters. Only by intellectualizing my actual reading experience did I distance myself sufficiently from the story to evaluate the author's intention in writing it. And I am trained, at least to some degree, in sophisticated reading theories. As naive readers are confronted by such material, they often see it as representative of the conditions of the real world and therefore as justification for their own violence. And unfortunately, the majority of readers, it seems to me, are naive.

Furthermore, in many of these stories, dramas, and screenplays, the characters who are brutalized are women, children, minorities, gays—the very individuals who in real life are most at risk in our violent society. These characters are seldom if ever centered in the texts. Because the writers have not imagined these characters fully, readers don't know them and don't identify with them. The characters finally don't matter; in consequence, their suffering doesn't matter either. Such literature seems to me to promote the conditions of imaginative poverty that kept Americans from comprehending the experiences

of the Jews in the concentration camps, that kept the Americans from acting to stop the atrocities. Considering the social conditions in which we live, it seems a moral imperative that those who are actually, in their real lives, potentially subject to violence should be imagined wholly in our texts.

Once in a fit of anger, I wrote a poem that describes what I mean. It is an offensive poem, for which I apologize:

To the Violent Literati

This ten-year-old on the swing
has her own problems—a bully
ripped the tongue from her soccer shoe.
Leave her alone. Don't claim her
for your story where she winds up
knifed in the park, her tongue cut out
because a teen-aged boy didn't like her talk.

This mother at the breadboard, cutting
meat for stew while her husband watches
the Super Bowl, knows she is dumpy,
dull, and couldn't make a decent
buck. Why do you need to rip her
from her home, where she'll probably
get beaten anyway, and put her in the path
of your crazed psychotic, so he can
demonstrate his dementia in the literary lot?

If you must have a child to die brutally,
bones broken, freezing at the bottom
of a well, let him be your own.
Make the pattern of the sleepers
you put him in each night,
then foul them with excrement and mud;
leave wisps of his hair—its very color—
on the limb they used to beat him,
stiff in tufts with scalp and blood.

Rape your own lover, your wife.
If she agrees, go to bed with her,
write the smell of her skin,
the shape of belly, breasts,
then gouge the eyes from her head
and let her writhe while you read her
this story of herself.

Or better yet, if you must have victims,
sacrifice yourself. Yes you,
young professor, sure of your philosophic
posture and academic rights;
let the natural born killers find you
at the convenience store, put the barrel
of the real shotgun in your mouth
and spatter your brains across the Coke cups.

Or later in your career—university provost
now—advancement based on awards
for your astonishing brutality
(fictional, of course)—have the terrorists
kidnap you from your plush,
high office, torture you in detail
till the institution sends the cash,
then castrate you anyway
and let you bleed to death.

Write your own torture often
enough—the rapist's fist, the knife
slicing your face—and you might feel
what it is always to walk
through the world in a body
that looks like the bodies of victims.

I wouldn't publish this poem as a poem, but it was
instructive for me to write it. Although it makes its
point, it perpetrates the very violence I am protest-
ing. It shows no moral imagination but responds to
a perceived brutality in literature (to women and
children) by returning—and thus perpetuating—that
brutality on the authors of that violence. Let it stand
for the very type of literature I think we need to
stop writing.

Another reason I protest violent literature is that
we already have so many examples of extreme
violence in our actual lives. Locally, we have the
eighteen-year-old woman who was kidnapped in Salt
Lake City last Saturday night, held at gunpoint, and
raped by six young men. We have the kid who
dressed up like the Woody Harrelson character in
Natural Born Killers and murdered his stepmother
and his sister. We have death over a disagreement at
a pay phone. We have drive-by shootings at the
Delta Center and many Salt Lake neighborhoods.
We have gangs. On the national scene, we have the

stabblings of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald
Goldman. We have Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer.
We have one man who opened fire on the New
York subway a few weeks ago, another who shot up
the family planning and abortion clinics in Boston.
We have the bombing of the World Trade Center.
And then, internationally, we have Chechnya,
Sarajevo, the West Bank, Somalia, Iraq, and Kuwait.
In 1993, Maxine Hong Kingston wrote, "At this
moment, we human beings are fighting 36 wars,
which I can't keep up with, name, be informed
about, let alone stop" (5).

Images of this actual violence come into our
homes daily thanks to the miracle of television. And
then we have television entertainment itself. An
American child from a middle-class home, by the
time he or she turns eighteen, will have watched
200,000 acts of violence on television. Violence is
redundant. To create violence in literature, when
there is so much of it in our lives, is not a stretch of
imagination. It is a very easy choice, not worthy of
the best Mormon minds writing in the last days of
the twentieth century. I think the extremely gifted
individuals who are writing such literature could
make far more important contributions.

It seems to me that the moral, spiritual, and
intellectual imperative of our time and generation is
to transform our violence into some other method of
solving conflict. Such a dramatic change can only
come about from a general shift in the thinking of
a whole people. The stories we claim as a society are
a powerful, even an unconscious force in creating
the metaphors that help us construct our lives.
Would it not be a much more challenging and
essential project to create artistic images of people
responding to conflict without either becoming
victims or resorting to the violence that makes others
victims? Do we have the moral imagination even to
conceive of such possibilities in works of literature?

Christ is the best example I know of someone
whose stories make use of a moral imagination. Take
the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example
(Luke 10:25-37). The occasion is this: a lawyer,
trying to trap Christ, asks what he should do to
inherit eternal life. Christ answers with a question:
What is written in the law? What do you think? The
man responds well—to love God with all one's

heart, soul, and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself—and Christ praises his answer. Then the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Christ answers with this story, which I have rewritten into our own cultural situation so that we will hear it:

A certain man was traveling from Salt Lake to Lehi on Redwood Road when his car broke down in the middle of the night. He ran into a gang, who stripped him, shot him in the neck, and ran off, leaving him half dead.

And by chance a certain stake president came down the road, and when he saw the injured man in the headlights, moved quickly into the inside lane of traffic and passed by.

And likewise a bishop came walking down the sidewalk, looked at the victim, then quickly crossed to the other side of the street and walked past.

But a certain Native American, Catholic by religion, as he drove by, passed the wounded man, and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

And went to him, administered what first aid he could, then got him quickly into his car, drove him to the emergency room, and took care of him.

And before the Native American left, he got out his checkbook, paid the emergency room bills, and said to the accounting department, "Take care of him. If he doesn't have insurance, I'll be responsible for the bill."

Which of these three do you think was the neighbor of the man who was attacked by the gang?

The startling, disruptive power of this story is much clearer when the characters are contemporary. And don't you see Christ's moral imagination at work? his way of stimulating the moral imagination of his audience? The story begins with an act of violence, but its focus is the response of several individuals to that violence. Each person who comes upon the victim is presented with the moral choice of either helping or ignoring the wounded man. In the original parable, Christ broke down cultural assumptions that kept the Jews from judging a priest or a Levite or a Samaritan by his actions rather than by his social or ecclesiastical position. Christ also

created responsibility in his audience—the lawyer who asked "Who is my neighbor?"—by leaving the attorney to figure out for himself that his neighbor is anyone who comes before him with a need.

When we read this parable from the context of our own society, it also becomes clear why Christ was so disturbing to the Jewish leaders. To use as characters a priest and a Levite (or a stake president and a bishop) and then to place them in a moral dilemma in which they fail to act with courage and love is to acknowledge that in real life such leaders might similarly fail and that no one should consider himself above sin, above the need for repentance.

So it seems to me that a moral imagination might be an intriguing personal capacity to try to develop and use in the writing of literature. A moral imagination would not deny life's genuine difficulties and perplexities (or the actual conditions of violence in our world). The artist would certainly include those realities in his work, but a moral imagination should spur an author to get beyond the limited number of ways of responding to those difficulties offered by her conscious mind, a mind that has been limited by her culture. My moral imagination should tell me, "Come on, Susan, engage. There are many more possibilities for presenting and then resolving violent conflict than the usual ones. Use your language. Use your imagination."

Another of Christ's imaginative, incredible teachings in the Sermon on the Mount addresses the problems of violence:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.

And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.

Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. (Matt. 5:38-42)

All of these directions offer imaginative ways to respond to being hurt without returning violence. And all of Christ's suggested responses are moral,

respond to being hurt without returning violence. And all of Christ's suggested responses are moral, creative acts. To take an eye in retribution for an eye that has been lost is not a creative act; it destroys another eye. Christ recommends, instead of this course, to "resist not evil," to turn away from evil and instead of trying to destroy what is evil, to act in creating what is good. By the ancient Roman law under which the Jews lived, any Roman citizen could compel a Jew to give up his coat or to accompany him for one mile. Those were not creative acts; they were involuntary servitude. But to see the Roman citizen as a human being and to do good to such a person by giving him one's cloak as well as one's coat or by offering to accompany him a second mile was to offer a voluntary act of goodness, an individual creative gift. Christ asks us to create rather than to destroy, to do good rather than to do evil. That is the only way to stop one violent act from becoming a cycle of revenge, the kinds of cycles we see being carried out all over the world in incidents between nations, ethnic groups, religious communities, and even gangs.

It requires a considerable imagination to return good for evil. When the vet gives my dog a shot, my dog always tries to bite the vet. Unfortunately, human beings respond the same way. When someone hurts us, our immediate reaction is to hurt them back or to direct our anger at those we can hurt. Violence begets violence; abuse begets abuse. Would it not be useful to have powerful stories to teach us other possibilities?

It seems an impossible ideal to suggest that our imaginations might create stories to help us transform our tendency to violence into something else. But in every religious culture that I know of, there are stories of salvation as well as stories of destruction. I feel that imagination may be, though it is not necessarily, connected to the power of God. My experience of imagination is in every way connected with my understanding of the processes of creation. Like the Gods, we have the possibility to bring into being from unorganized matter that which did not exist before. And these creations can be beautiful, can expand our understanding of our lives, can teach us what we do not know.

SUSAN ELIZABETH HOWE, 1995 President of the Association for Mormon Letters, is currently the poetry editor of *Dialogue* and a contributing editor of *Tar River Poetry*. Her poems have appeared in *Shenandoah*, *The New Yorker*, *Southwest Review*, and other journals; she is currently working on her first collection of poetry.

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CITATION:
Honoring WAYNE C. BOOTH
Named Lifetime Member of
the Association for Mormon Letters, 1995

The Association for Mormon Letters is pleased to extend its Honorary Lifetime Membership Award to Wayne C. Booth, George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Chicago. While this award has typically been reserved for authors and teachers who have written for a specialized Mormon audience, we honor Wayne for his Mormon contribution to the world of letters. As a teacher, scholar, and academic leader Wayne has mixed reasoned argument and irony with a keen sense of the need for faith and the moral life.

A strong desire to teach freshmen, stimulated by his experience with Karl Young, P. A. Christensen, and many others at BYU, led Wayne, upon receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, first to Haverford College and then to Earlham College, where he began his distinguished teaching career. While at Earlham he undertook the seven-year project that resulted in the publication of his first scholarly book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which won the Christian Gauss Award from Phi Beta Kappa and the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research from the National Council of Teachers of English.

An invitation to join the graduate faculty at the University of Chicago came in 1962, though he has said that the "chance to teach beginning students again in the wonderful Chicago College attracted me at least as much as the chance to join a graduate faculty." Once at Chicago, Wayne was soon awarded the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. He was also named Dean of the College, where he served with great distinction during the student upheavals of the late sixties. He is fondly remembered by students and faculty alike as an oasis of reason in a desert of political turmoil.

During those years, his scholarship flourished. He edited two collections of essays and contributed two more significant works on rhetoric. He was becoming recognized as the foremost rhetorical critic in the United States. At the same time, he was pursuing the limits and powers of pluralism. The resulting book, *Critical Understanding*, presents a powerful argument for both the ethics and the rigor of pluralism as a critical tool.

During the late seventies he presented a series of lectures on ethics and literature at the School of Criticism and Theory which were to become the magisterial *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. At the same time, he was elected President of the Modern Language Association. Again, he led an organization through difficult times, earning the respect of colleagues for his ability to understand conflicting positions and to offer new direction for the profession.

His desire to connect literature with the moral and political life led to an invitation to deliver one of the 1992 Amnesty International Lectures on Freedom and Interpretation.

Wayne C. Booth has made a unique and lasting contribution to Mormon letters. He has authored or edited eleven books. His careful thinking has allowed us to better understand how literature and character can be connected for the betterment of society. He has shown how what we read and who we are can never be entirely separated. Booth has confirmed what we Mormons have known all along, that changed lives result "from a close reading of beloved . . . and sacred books."

Why Do Mormon Writers Find It So Hard To Climb Parnassus?

Wayne C. Booth

It felt quite nice to hear that warm introduction from Neal Kramer, but I'm afraid I have bad news for you. My way of preparing a talk always leaves me, almost to the last minute, with a manuscript much too long.¹ This week when I arrived at the point of cutting the talk down to size, I came down with a deadly cold, and consequently have not had time or energy for cutting. What remains—you may as well prepare yourselves for this—may take as long as two or three hours.

That's my *First Introduction*.

Second Introduction:

My text tonight comes from the speech by Elder Boyd K. Packer, the one he gave at BYU in 1976, addressing the relation of religious devotion to artistic excellence. In that speech he quotes a wise old saying: "Many men struggle to climb to reach the top of the ladder, only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall" (Sondrup 13).

Whenever I've tried to think about the relation of Mormonism and the arts, and the various ladders or mountains artists might try to climb, I've found myself going not up but down, landing in deep—ah, er—waters. This time I quickly got in over my head and started swimming in circles, without even being able to see the shore.

So here's what, in my weakened state, turns out to be my *Third Introduction*:

A former student of mine now teaching at the "Y" said to me recently that every talk he ever heard me give showed me dodging behind some ironic gimmick, like these multiple introductions. "You always use irony," he charged, "and I think you do it to avoid barefaced commitment." I had thought I used irony in order to avoid putting audiences to sleep. Anyway, the comment made me decide that for this talk I would just have to be absolutely up front, banning all ironies, all gim-

mickry. If I wanted to celebrate certain kinds of writing over certain kinds of trash, or if I wanted to celebrate one way of talking about Mormon fiction and poetry rather than another way, I swore to myself that I would just say so, right out, with no multiplying of unreliable voices, no ironic dodges.

Of course I have kept that vow 100 percent. But you won't be surprised to learn that things got pretty complicated, thinking about and around that title I had rashly given the organizers what seemed like years ago. As I asked why so many Mormon writers claim that the climb toward excellence is harder than in many other cultures, I quickly found myself no longer swimming aimlessly but just plain stuck, up to my hubs in mud without a shovel. Even after all these years of thinking about Mormonism and the arts, I hadn't quite realized just how complex the issues are, or just how ignorant I am about what is actually going on.

I assume that many of you share my confusion about the issues and may share even my ignorance of more than a fraction of the recent floods of novels, stories, and poems—floods that could never have been predicted even fifteen years ago when I gave my talk at BYU something like on this subject. At that time, for example, a diligent scholar could probably have read in less than a year all of the fiction that might be called Mormon under anybody's definition. Today such an assignment would be overwhelming. It would be like Tristram Shandy trying to write his life and opinions and discovering that at the end of the first year of writing he had lived so much that there was more to write about than when he started. Like him, we'll never catch up. Even the most discerning critic in 1980 would have been astonished, and some would have been appalled, if they could have predicted the explosion of art

works that Mormons have produced in those fifteen years.

As I got in deeper and deeper and fussed around in my usual way, trying out various approaches and organizations, I felt loaded down with a broad range of questions that seemed to lead to contradictory answers: for example, "Just what is a Mormon work of literature?" Or, "Is the quest for the great Mormon novel similar to—and as hopeless as—the quest for the great American novel that people were fussing about in my teens?"

Since my deepest question tonight is, "How can we deal with our passionate desire for success in the eyes of the world?" I have to digress and tell you of an entry I recently discovered in my teenage diary: "I have been accepted," I wrote proudly, in 1936, "for membership in the Book of the Month Club!" Obviously the boy thought of it as a first step up Parnassus.

Back to business. As you'd predict, I found questions of many kinds pouring in:

1. About our goals: "Just what do we mean by 'success' or 'greatness,' or even 'excellence'?"

2. About subject matter: "Does a good Mormon novel, let alone a great one, have to represent *Mormon* characters?"

3. About levels of orthodoxy: "Does a Mormon novel, great or only good, have to end with an explicitly recognizable doctrinal conclusion?"

4. About origins: "Does Mormon literature have to have been created by an avowed Mormon of good standing, or could it be by a merely listed Mormon, or even an excommunicant? Could there be a good Mormon novel by a friendly non-Mormon student of Mormonism like Jan Shipps or Bill Martin? Is there a sense in which *Angels in America* is a Mormon play, since three of the six main characters are Mormons and the play is full of allusions to Joseph Smith, the Angel Moroni and gold plates?"

. . . and so on to questions about historical influence: "Does the worry about producing successful or even great literature simply stem from our American heritage of success drives, or is it distinctively related to our unique doctrines?" In other words, Is the passion for success shown by Mormon writers any different from the drives

shown by most Americans from the beginning, as described in that much neglected work by Martha Banta, *Failure and Success in America*? Or as illustrated in my Book of the Month Club boast?

Such questions broadened out to even more general and intractable ones: Just what is the difference between a Mormon kind of greatness or excellence and a non-Mormon kind? Is it really harder to create good literature working within a Mormon culture than it is working in a Catholic culture, or Baptist culture, or Quaker culture, or explicitly secular culture? After all, how many centuries did it take before the Catholics produced *The Divine Comedy*? And just how many great Quaker or Baptist or Seventh-day Adventist works of literature can we name?

In short, thinking about whether there is a real clash between Mormon ideals and artistic ideals seemed to lead everywhere without getting anywhere.

Finally, feeling even more desperate than I had felt in preparing that speech of 1980, I remembered how my problem had been solved then, and I decided to get in touch with those devils whose discovered correspondence had rescued me when I spoke at BYU. Some of you may remember those letters of Devil Smoother and his Chief that I found in the BYU archives. If their letters could provide a speech fifteen years ago, why couldn't similar letters rescue me now? After all, those devils must have been active here all this while, and they would surely know the scene much better than I do. But how on earth was I to get in touch with wicked creatures like that, living as I do in utter virtue among totally virtuous friends and colleagues? I assumed that after I stole the Chief's letters from the "Y" in 1980, he would have ordered all his minions to destroy every subsequent letter.

I fussed a few more days and finally turned to Phyllis, as I always do, and she asked, without a moment's pause, "Have you tried e-mail?"

That's what I did: I fiddled about in the various networks until I finally found an address labelled *Smoother@SLC.Mor.Art*, the Mor obviously standing for Mormon. I logged on, my hopes high, but all I got at first was one message:

January 1, 1994
From: The Chief

Congratulations, Smoother, on your good work over the past fourteen years. Keep it up. Must tell you that our headquarters have been moved to Washington D.C., where things are looking up. I am troubled though by my one stupid oversight in 1980. It made good sense to send those assistants to Utah—Slider, to advance hypocrisy, Smudger, in charge of blurring issues, Stunter, our expert in Pharisaism, and Shrinker, our general manager; they've all done good work. But it was stupid of me not to include at least one expert in pushing ambition and competitiveness and rivalry. All our reports show that the soil is rich there for destroying souls by planting anxiety about success. So I've decided to transfer Climber from New York City to the Wasatch front. In New York she's been in charge of our Operation Fame, Ambition, Money, and Esteem (FAME, for short). In Utah she'll not be stationed with you there in the Visitors' Center, still working on smoothing, but down at BYU where there's a higher concentration of writers who are ripe for Climber's plucking. You and Climber must keep in touch daily.

Again my warmest thanks for all you've accomplished since 1980. Your triumph with the popular success of *Saturday's Warriors* was unprecedented. As you know, I was really worried after that speech of President Kimball, back in '77, where he urged everyone to seek true excellence in the arts—not fame but excellence. That seemed to threaten our program to the core, and I congratulate you, again, on having ensured that fewer and fewer Church leaders ever talk like that any more or even mention the arts in their public addresses, except when they have found some piece of it they don't like.²

Just keep it up, and give Climber whatever help she needs in getting acquainted with Mormon culture. As I'm sure you know, she's had fantastic success in New York. The number of total frauds achieving fame has doubled in the five years she's been there, the total

number of annual prizes in the arts, especially TV, has increased five times, and a recent survey has demonstrated that the average artist working at the easel or word processor, is now spending 62 percent more time worrying about FAME than thinking creatively. Of course Climber wasn't working alone; she had a lot of helpers. But if she can do the job in Utah that she's done on the east coast, we've got it made.
—The Chief

Well, as you can imagine, I quickly located Climber's e-mail address, *Climber@BYU.Mor.Art*, called up her file, and lo and behold, my efforts were rewarded. I thought to myself, I'm saved: that's all I need for my talk. But as you'll see, I was in for a big setback.

Here's what I first picked up:

January 30, 1994
From: Climber

I gotta sort of complain, Smoother, that I haven't a clue about what I'm supposed to be doing down here in Utah Valley. The Chief only told me I was to make artists ambitious for the wrong things, but he didn't even lay out what the typical soul is like out here. In New York I could count on a good motive-base of greed and ambition, with not much worry about virtue. I thought the souls would be roughly the same out here. But I'm finding in at least half of the souls I've been probing that when they long for success—and they all do—it's often about quite different kinds of climbing: like hoping for widespread spiritual impact or an increase in the total number of conversions or a strengthening of testimonies, regardless of profit. And I'm finding about ten different kinds of guilt-ridden self-reproach. I'm confused.

I just don't see any openings. I've been reading through the Chief's instructions to you, and it seems to me that his slogans, like "homogenize, tranquilize, desensitize" and his suggestion that you organize a "Utah Academy of the Comfortable Arts" made things a lot easier for you than my assignment to build a chapter of FAME. It's a lot harder to move

these folks to sleazy ambition than it was for you to get the bookstores flooded with fiction that their Edward Geary says goes "only skin deep, masking an underlying vision which is as foreign to [their] gospel as it is to real life." Please advise.

February 2, 1994

From: Smoother

To: Climber

Look here, dummkopf, did you read the instructions I sent you on the first day? I'll copy 'em here again, since it's easy. Print 'em out, and *memorize* 'em, for Chief's sake!

You gotta think hard about three different groups: first, the would-be writers; second, the audience for literature—the potential buyers of books; and third, as a subgroup of those consumers, the critics, those who pride themselves on thinking about literature and trying to stimulate good writing—you know, those enemies of ours who support the Association for ML. Working with all three groups, it's obvious that your first commandment should be: "Getting ahead of rivals and earning the badge of success is what it's all about." But the language has to be different for each group.

With the writers, you just have to nag 'em daily with anxiety about why other writers, Mormon or non-Mormon, get more attention, more fame, more money. Keep planting thoughts like, "If Card has figured out how to sell well outside Utah, why can't I?" or "If I just keep my plots simple, predictable, and sentimentally testimony building, can I get on those bursting shelves in the Mormon fiction section of the Deseret Bookstores?"

Print up and distribute slogans like "FAME MEANS QUALITY," "NUMBERS OUT-RANK JUDGMENT," and "COUNTING MEASURES SUCCESS." Also distribute my following slight revision of Mark Twain's "Revised Catechism"—it worked in 1871 and it'll work now: "What is the chief end of man? [Twain's prophet asked and answered]: to get rich and famous. In what way?—dishonestly if we can; honestly if we must. Who is God, the

one only and true? Success is God. Money, fame, and power—father, son, and the holy ghost—three persons in one: these are the true and only God, mighty and supreme: and Stephen King is his prophet" (qtd. in Banta 173).³

Don't forget that the slogans have to be different depending on whether you're dealing with folks who think they are orthodox and folks who think they are not. With the orthodox, "Numbers outrank judgment" can be translated into "Quality schmality, as long as it makes the most converts." With the unorthodox, "Numbers outrank judgment" can be translated into "Quality schmality, as long as it gets published by a big-name, non-Mormon press."

By the way, I have to say that you did a lousy job last month—you failed to organize the burning of all remaining copies of that *Weber Studies* article by William Mulder, "Essential Gestures: Craft and Calling in Contemporary Mormon Letters." It describes an astonishing number of books and stories and poems that we must suppress with every fiber of our being—to use a metaphor just revived by one of our Washington followers.

In short, you've been so slack I called Chief and asked him to send out Booster to replace you. But Chief said he needed Booster to work on the Republicans in preparation for the election in the fall.⁴

Secondly, your task with the nonwriters, the consumers, the Mormon public. The principles here are simple: just work on everybody, readers and nonreaders, especially all authorities, to increase the pressure on writers to leave their desks and do something else more important than getting the writing done.

Principle 1: Convince the Church authorities to pick out the most promising writers and set them, or their husbands, apart as bishops—or any really demanding position that will tempt the virtuous. Work to reverse the current moves to diminish the number of demands on members' time. Multiply meetings. Make meetings last longer. The primary

point here is to make every writer feel guilty about any hours spent at the writing desk. Writers who are parents, and especially mothers, provide the richest territory here; plant in their hearts the motto, "Writing hours are guilty hours."

Principle 2. Stress the Mormon tradition of never paying artists, or never paying much for what they do. The old slogan that we've often attacked elsewhere, "Create purely for the love of creating and not for financial reward," is actually useful in Mormon culture, because it capitalizes on Mormons' genuine virtues of generosity and community spirit, while ensuring that every writer will be forced to do some other kind of work to make a living. The "M" part of our FAME program, "Money," is a necessity; and if you can ensure, as you managed to do in New York, that only the shoddiest art provides a decent income, we've got it made. The main threat to our cause, as I the Chief am always reminding you, is anything that frees writers to follow their writing passion wherever it may lead.

Principle 3. I was shocked yesterday, Climber, to learn that you have totally ignored . . .

And on Smoother went, for screenful after screenful on my computer. I'll have to skip a bit, if we are not to fulfill my threat of a two-hour session. But finally I came to this:

June 5, 1994
From: Smoother
To: Climber

Good job, that, my girl, talking the Association of Mormon Letters into enticing Booth out for the fund-raiser. He's so often fallen into our claws because of his irrepressible ambition, and he's sure to come out and urge all the Mormon writers to commit themselves to climbing up the national ladder. And he'll chant at them, "If you wanna move up, move out."

Keep playing on his habitual temptation to worry about whether everybody will think his

speech the best keynote ever, and get him to pontificate about how Mormons can climb higher and better and faster.

Deeply insulted, I read on and came to this:

January 8, 1995
From: Smoother
To: Climber

I don't want to seem too ambitious, O my kindly, generous friend, but I do think it's time to ask the Chief for my promotion. I've got Booth working in exactly the way we planned. He's doing a speech that subtly identifies himself only with the most avant garde, most intellectual, most secular writers; without saying it up front, his current draft implies that every so-called Mormon writer should really do everything possible to escape out from under the Mormon umbrella, spend fulltime at the desk, neglect all Mormon commitments, and gain recognition from the great world, out there.

You can understand my sense of triumph as I observed his reaction to that picture and article about him in the *Deseret News*. Even in New York City I've seldom seen a clearer demonstration of crass Famism: his very heart glowed with pleasure. I caught him thinking—though of course he would never *say* it to anyone, "I only wish more of my high school friends were still alive so they could see that; *I went 'back east' and I succeeded!* That'll show those so-called friends who refused to vote me in as Representative Boy in our senior year!"

Well, needless to say, I simply stopped reading. I just couldn't go on. Imagine how I felt as I saw the devil's right-hand woman identifying *me* as a sell-out who could be relied on to further *their* program of encouraging false ambition and competitiveness and honors-counting and success mongering. I was so shattered that I sat and thought and thought and thought about it all, feeling more and more miserable. But after two more days of anguished self-probing, I pulled myself together yesterday and wrote a brand-new

speech, one that might be called "Climbing Schlimbing, as long as it's good literature." Unfortunately, we'll not have enough time for that really quite wonderful speech, humble yet sophisticated, penetrating—all we'll have time for are a few scattered bits. For example:

Fourth Introduction

Well, folks, first a couple of preliminaries:

I always find that after giving a title I want to change it, as my always fumbling thoughts jerk—no, no, let's skip that. . . This time I do want to change the title, for reasons you'll later understand, to one of the following . . . no, we don't have time for all that; let's hurry on to the meat, of which we all know we should consume very little . . . Ah, here we are:

Like our General Authorities, literary critics who have debated about whether literature at its best and Mormonism at its best can be reconciled have never come to full agreement. Many critics have, like Karen Lynn, concluded that there is an inherent and irresolvable conflict between aesthetics and Mormon doctrines and practices (Sondrup 50). And many, like Marshall Bruce Gentry, have decided that "Mormonism is thoroughly compatible with the paradoxical complexity of the best contemporary fiction" (147).

Fifteen years ago I argued, in my uninformed way, that, though there was no inherent reason preventing the fulfillment promised by President Kimball in his famous speech, fulfillment would never come until we had developed a fully free, vigorous, sustained critical culture—the kind of culture that in Greece slowly culminated in great drama and sculpture, in Elizabethan England culminated in a fantastic outburst of first-class writing of all kinds, in nineteenth-century France produced impressionism, in England, America, and Russia in the same century produced those great novels, in Germany produced centuries of fantastic musical triumphs, and so on. When I accepted the invitation to talk with you tonight, I had intended to underline and illustrate the claim that the future of Mormon literature depends absolutely on the continued development of a lively, fully free, fully honest critical culture.

This talk has wriggled out from under that topic, as I've shifted more and more from *how* questions to *why* or *whether*. But of course as soon as we try to think about what kind of success we should aspire to, we do land in the question of what *kind* of critical culture we need.

A critical culture does not consist only of people who like or admire this or that kind of art. It consists of a critical mass of people who have themselves practiced the art sufficiently to become fully knowledgeable critics, distinguishing good moves from bad. A critical *literary* culture consists not just of those who give themselves a good read now and then; it requires large numbers of would-be authors who can say to a friend, "Well, Bill, if that *Othello* were mine, I'd blot a few lines." Or: "You know, Charlie, I love this draft of *Bleak House*, but Chapter 13 is much too long. Is it because you're being paid by the word?" Or just plain: "Tom, I hate to say this, but these hundred and twenty pages in this manuscript you call *Of Time and the River* are so long-winded, so far below your standard that they just have to be thrown out."⁵

Do we have that kind of critical culture? One test, which I dare not apply here, would be to ask for a show of hands from all of you who have worked hard yourself at trying to write the kind of literature you love and thus feel confident that you are qualified to offer critical advice to the practitioners you admire. How many of you have, like me, full-length but unfinished drafts of novels in your secret files? How many of you feel that you know as much about the craft of fiction or poetry as you know about one or more popular sports?

Utah, like the rest of America, has a critical culture for football and basketball and tennis. We produce world-class athletes because large numbers of our kids not only start playing from the earliest years but also because they are surrounded by parents, companions, and coaches who know a good play from a bad one, who know good form when they see it, who shout their criticism from the stands or in the locker room, who boo not just when the ball is fumbled but when the wrong play is called, who read sports columnists' criticism every day, who . . .

I expect, or rather I hope, that there are many here now tempted to shout out, "You're wrong. I read more literary criticism than athletic criticism." Or: "My son is practicing the cello daily, and the family listens to music at least three hours a week." Or: "My daughter has been writing poetry from the age of six." Or: "My kids have been practicing the art of story telling, like Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters, both orally and in writing, almost from birth." If enough of you can shout that correction back at me, our worries about a critical culture are essentially over, and I can therefore here conclude Talk 4 and move to Talk 5 with a brand-new title: "Should Any Writer, Mormon or non-Mormon, aspire to greatness, and If So, What Kind of Greatness?" You can see that it was Climber's nasty stuff about my own ambitious competitiveness that led me at last to the right form of our question.

Let's look again at the paradoxes faced by any Mormon who aspires to greatness or competes for this or that top prize. Is it true that the very aspiration to outdo others, like the temptation to say why their stuff isn't worth much, is inescapably a move into Climber's domain? To try to become number 1, even number 1 in the most thoroughly orthodox Mormon literature, converting more converts than some other writer converts, lands the writer in a spiritual paradox. To aspire to get your so-called Mormon writing recognized either at home or abroad threatens to land you precisely in Climber's territory. Yet without passionate aspiration, we know for a certainty that no really fine literature is ever written.

The only possible resolution of this paradox is for the writer to attend mainly—if possible entirely—to perfecting works of art, let the chips of fame and money or official approval fall where they may. The struggle must be to create something that no one else could have created, something that somehow ennobles or enriches the life of both the creator and those who rise to the level required to appreciate it. That superlative value is not measured by democratic vote, though some forms of true greatness, like *Huckleberry Finn*, achieve wide popularity; it is not measured by impact, though most great art does change the

world in major ways. It is measured by genuine but elusive standards of quality, standards of achievement beyond the range of other achievers and often not recognized, at least for a long time, by more than a few observers.

I find it interesting to see how often even the most intelligent, self-critical, generous-spirited Mormons risk falling, like me, into Climber's claws. Even Eugene England, for example, in his splendid introduction and notes to his indispensable recent anthology, *Bright Angels and Familiar*, sounds part of the time as if the measure of excellence really is, after all, prizes and awards. Though his anthology admirably includes both visible winners and unknown newcomers, Gene's comments sometimes imply—I *know* that it is against his own true beliefs—that recognition is what everyone should aspire to and that those who haven't received it yet are not as important as those he celebrates. About a third of the little biographies he includes proudly mention some award or prize from outside Mormon culture; almost all of them include words like *award*, *prize*, *second prize*—most of them from groups like ours here that did not even exist until quite recently. Brother Gene knows the difference between good stories and not-so-good and might well have spent more of his words telling us the artistic reasons why he thinks each story deserves the "prize" of being included in his anthology.

Of course I'm not saying that no genuinely great writer ever was tempted to be basely competitive; base competition can be found in almost everyone, at some hours of the day. My point is that great literature is always motivated *also* by what must be called "higher" motives: the motive to make something that is genuinely, superlatively excellent.

People talk about these higher motives of the writer in lots of different ways, but it's comforting to any theorist to recognize that they all can be boiled down to two: "I, the writer, write not just to earn money or fame but to gain something indescribably, uniquely worthwhile for myself," or "I do it to offer something outstandingly, uniquely worthwhile to others." In short, I want to improve *something* in the world, either the quality of my

own life or the lives of others. Reward will always be secondary—though I don't promise to turn it down if it is ever offered.

Each of these hopes for genuine quality can be stated in many different ways. Many writers say that they create the work to "get it out of my system, because it was torturing me," or "to express my true feelings," or "to create a self superior to my everyday self," or "to feel the sense of making beauty," or even just "to express anger or despair," or "to feel myself revenged against injustice." Overtly religious writers often say that their act of creation is a private prayer to God—a prayer or meditation superior to any prayer not turned into literature; George Herbert, all of whose poems are overtly religious, most of them kept private until after his death, puts it this way, concluding his wonderful "The Flower":

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: Oh, my only Light,
It cannot be
That I am he

On whom thy tempests fell all night.

We might say that Herbert was writing only for himself, since he didn't publish. But he preserved those poems carefully and they are ours now.

In fact, most of the answers to the question "Why aspire to perfection?" move out from the author's needs to include some sort of attention to the *world's* needs. Most authors, even those least concerned about fame, are eager to get their achievements out where they'll do something to or for other people.

But what should that something be? Many a critic has stated flatly that it should not be anything overtly didactic: literature and doctrinal preaching are flatly contradictory. But such critics fail to distinguish two kinds of writer-preachers. On the one hand are those who think mainly of quantitative, tangible results: how many bodies did the story or painting or musical composition get under the baptismal water, or what was the increase of those paying a full tithing, or of those who drink no liquor and eat but a very little meat,

or of those who really put their shoulder to the wheel? Such results are of course not to be sneezed at, but they have little to do with what makes literature good or great.

In contrast are a second kind, the author-preachers who think qualitatively about the deeper effects of their works on the souls of those who read them: Was the testimony really improved in its depth or breadth or richness or stability? Was the inner life of my readers genuinely enriched? Were they more likely to experience, both while living with me and in the hours and days and years afterward, the "joy" that is celebrated when we say that we *are* that we might have a bit of it? For both of these kinds of writer-preachers, the written works are finally to be judged in their instrumental value as determined after the reading event: Have they done any good in the world today? Have they helped anyone in need?

In this view, to aspire to anything like "greatness" in the outsider's definition would be either silly or wicked. To be consistent, anyone holding this position should never care whether a work wins any prizes, inside or outside the Church: the only concern should be: Did it further *anyone's* spiritual growth?

We should note, however, that though people who wish to serve others with their literature should not care about greatness in any other definition, there is no inherent reason why a work that has great instrumental value cannot be judged great by noninstrumental, or so-called purely artistic or aesthetic values. Milton announced that he wrote *Paradise Lost* to justify the ways of God to man: to clear up an intellectual error, you might say. His purpose was explicitly instrumental, not "aesthetic." Dante clearly intended that *The Divine Comedy* should lead its readers to salvation through the embrace of the Christian God. Both works are thus blatantly didactic, not only in intent but also in the structure of every detail. Both works have been praised, however, by readers of every conceivable faith, including utter atheists. And both works have yielded a great deal of simple, straightforward pleasure to nonbelievers, self-proclaimed atheists whose spiritual lives have been affected more than they were themselves aware of.

As we move a bit further away from the more overt kinds of didacticism, we come to a different kind of gift to others, a purpose that is harder to talk about with any clarity. It is a gift that is in fact offered by even the most self-centered writers as soon as they actually release their work to readers who find it gripping. I'm thinking of the offering of the kind of "comfort and joy" that comes not *after* we leave the literary work and return to the so-called world but during the time we live with it: the transforming of time from our ordinary time-bound world into that different kind of time-freed world in which literature is shared. Living with any literary work, when we really enter its world, simply constitutes a different kind of life: we are, in our deepest souls, quite different persons whenever we plunge deeply into a good novel or long poem or powerful play. I'm sure you've all had the experience, after such baptisms by immersion, of saying to yourselves not just, "That made my day," but "That is one of the things life is for." Man is—men and women are—that they might have at least *that* kind of joy. The pay-off is *now*, was *then*—regardless of what happens tomorrow. I may regress back to being a bastard or a bitch tomorrow, but I wasn't one during those hours.

The writer who creates in order to produce such moments is still in one special sense didactic: teaching qualities of life, teaching what good living feels like. But the quality is not determined by what the reader does the next day.

I'm sure that most of you remember the words of the hymn "Today While the Sun Shines." Since I grew up singing the 1948 version, I was not pleased with the 1985 revision, which changed the final line of the chorus from "There is no tomorrow but only today," to "Prepare for tomorrow by working today." Whoever made that change was consciously or unconsciously working to destroy the value I have in mind here: the enhancing of life in the present moment, without thought about any payoff tomorrow or even in the eternal life.

The vicarious worlds we enter are, of course, of widely varying quality. Some can prove terribly destructive: instead of saying, "That made my day or week or month or (in the case of Proust) my year," we feel (as I often feel after watching a TV

show), "That part of my life was utterly wasted." We've now moved, then, toward a rather tricky notion of greatness or excellence. Though it can be considered instrumental in the sense of serving the souls of creator and receiver, it cannot be judged simply by what specific doctrines it tries to teach but only by how it transforms the quality of our lives during the time we spend with it. I'm sure you've all had the experience I'm thinking of: reading a long novel and wishing it would not end, wishing you could go on living in this imagined world rather than having to go back to everyday reality. This effect is to some degree experienced even with relatively cheap kinds of "escape" literature, especially the kind of detective or mystery fiction that carries us away "for the time being."

These two kinds of seemingly similar escape present us with one of the most difficult and interesting of all critical problems. How do you distinguish between the escape from the ordinary world provided by Louis L'Amour, say, or Agatha Christie, or the Harlequin romances, or the average "Mormon" novels that weigh down drugstore book racks, and the "escape" provided by Shakespeare or Tolstoy or Virginia Sorensen and Levi Peterson? You can't do it in simple doctrinal terms, asking questions like, "Is it Mormon or it is not?"

But hard as it is to talk about critically, the difference is fairly clear in experience, as I tried to explain at length in *The Company We Keep*. If you interrupt me in the middle of my reading of a Dick Frances romp and ask me, "Would you really prefer to live in that world, with those characters, rather than returning to your actual life?" I will tell you, "Go away. Of course not. I'm enjoying living here for a while but it's not a world I long for. I want to finish the book, but I don't want to live in it. I wouldn't even want to live in a country populated by characters who are similar to the implied author." But if you interrupt my reading of *War and Peace* or *Middlemarch* or even C. S. Lewis's *Perelandra*, and ask the same question, I will feel strongly that to live in this imaginary world—not just with the invented characters but with the implied author who invents them and

helps me understand them—is one gift that not only lets me escape the troubles of life for a few hours but makes life worth living. I'm likely not only to say, "Go away, don't interrupt"—but also, "Yes, I'd like to go on like this indefinitely—even when the characters or events are unpleasant or nasty, so long as the implied author is not celebrating the nastiness. This is not just a vicarious world, an alternative world; this is a *better* world, a longed-for world. This world feels to me the same way the best portrayals of heaven feel—at least when they are not boring. This is what life was intended to be, though somehow life manages to be like this only a small proportion of the time."

We arrive here at a point where the phrase "art for *art's* sake" and the phrase "art for *life's* sake" mean the same thing. When we think of literature as pursued for *life's* sake, literature for the sake of the life that it provides, then the battles between the aesthetic and the religious are no longer centered around the impracticality of the highest artistic experience. Now we can debate different levels of practical value, with religion and art united—at least some of the time, in kinds of experiences like those explored by William James in that great piece of scripture, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

None of this kind of thinking will remove all controversy. But it does allow us to recognize that many a work that makes no pretense to doctrinal orthodoxy can have more genuine religious power than many a work that celebrates that orthodoxy. The novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot and Tolstoy do not usually produce explicit conversion or increase the rates of tithing payment. But for the reader who reads wholeheartedly, the friendships that the implied authors of such works offer do in fact transform our hours: we live better lives while we are with them. And the marvelous invitation to Mormon artists is that many of the greatest works manage to combine this transformative effect with explicit doctrinal emphases: joyful life today and practical changes tomorrow. *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Four Quartets*.

When we think of such overwhelmingly powerful works, we arrive at a final point of potential harmony between the goals and effects of first-class

Mormon literature and first-class literature that is not Mormon. The greatest of religious literature springs not from predetermined doctrinal conclusions that can be stated in simple propositions. Rather it is always a probing of unclear and unfixed depths, often leading readers in directions that they could not have predicted in advance.

Since Harold Bloom has earned a lot of credit from us Mormons by praising us and our prophet, I'll quote him on this subject. What makes an author great, he says, with characteristic perception and unfortunately characteristic exaggeration, is *always* "strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange." What the great works have in common is "their ability to make you feel strange at home" (6). Incidentally, in talking of the "ultimate shock" that great works yield, he adds, "Perhaps some day, well on in the twenty-first century, when Mormonism has become the dominant religion of at least the American West, those who come after us will experience . . . such shock when they encounter the daring of the authentic American prophet Joseph Smith in his definitive visions, *The Pearl of Great Price* and the *Doctrine and Covenants*" (6).

In other words, the notion of greatness presupposes the possibility of spiritual change, not just conformity or reassurance but the likelihood that change is needed. It is needed not only in those who receive the literature but in the creators themselves: the creation of this new, surprising work is itself a major change: I am now *this* person and not the one I was before. There is always a chance, encountering any good literary work, that the reader's soul will discover a gross deficiency, a hitherto unsuspected sin, or even a new way of dealing with a flaw that he or she was already aware of. And that likelihood is always present at the moment a writer seriously attempts to create not just a successful work but the best possible work.

If that is so, doesn't the worry about what is Mormon and what is not Mormon literature disappear? Whether or not a Mormon literary work is initially recognizable as in any way really Mormon simply doesn't matter any longer. What

matters is whether it is a fine work of literature that does more than simply selling this or that doctrine, more than simply comforting or repeating past comforts, more than simply reassuring—though to repeat, none of those effects is worthless. All of us have moments when what we least need is shock, reformation. If I knew that a friend was seriously contemplating suicide, I wouldn't suggest that he go read Franz Kafka's "Hunger Artist" or *Moby Dick* or *The Backslider*. I would suggest some more obviously restful work. But what keeps any culture alive and growing are the moments when its healthiest, most confident representatives either undertake for themselves or are led to undertake by someone else's work a reformation, a restoration. Such moments provide not just full joyful escape from the world of time into a superior world. They produce a full spiritual transformation—the kind that turns a different person back into the world of time, after the rereading or listening or view is over. I felt an approach of that kind of greatness in the work of Virginia Sorensen earlier and in some of the stories collected by Eugene England in *Bright Angels and Familiars*.

From something like this perspective, I seem to hear an encouraging note. We don't have to spend so much time worrying about what is Mormon literature or how to reconcile Mormon literature with aesthetic values. We shouldn't spend any time at all worrying about recognition at home or abroad. If Mormon writers continue to master their craft and recognize that true mastery includes probing their deepest spiritual commitments, and if they find themselves increasingly embedded in a critical culture that feeds their desire to improve a craft that includes spiritual improvement, they will produce literature that, like some of the great non-Mormon religious works I have mentioned, will feed the spirit of Mormons and non-Mormons alike. A so-called Mormon work that genuinely grapples with the spiritual issues of Mormons will speak to the spiritual issues of those non-Mormons who are seriously engaged in spiritual inquiry. Obviously a footnote or two may be needed when seagulls or beehives are mentioned, but that's true of most of the great non-Mormon works. Who among us could really read Chaucer or Shakespeare

or Milton or T. S. Eliot without the aid of footnotes? And who of us who know those authors would really want to say that they are essentially non-Mormon and should not be on our religious shelves?

Of course there will still be conflict between some versions of Mormonism and some versions of aesthetic quality. But that kind of conflict has been found in every religious tradition—most notably perhaps right now in the conflict among Muslims themselves about whether or not to support the horrifying *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie.

In my view, then, the best possible Mormon literature will in the long run be indistinguishable from the best literature, period—except perhaps in surface details. Whether it will be "great" or not, according to any one narrow standard, depends on more factors than any of us can ever hope to control. But I predict that if all goes well, within about three hundred years—the time it took from the Norman conquest of England to Chaucer's prime, or two hundred more years, the time it took from Chaucer's prime to Shakespeare's, we may produce a Chaucer or Shakespeare. That seems more likely than that *non*-Mormon culture as it's now going will produce such greatness. Climber and the Chief are in charge out there, and we fight them best not by giving up on the drive for excellence but by leaning the right kind of ladder on the right wall.

That ended the draft of Number 5—or is it Number 7 by now?—but I couldn't resist going back to the e-mail to see how Climber and Booster and the Chief had reacted to my revision. This is all I could find:

January 11, 1995

From: The Chief

To: Smoother, Climber, and Booster

Okay, you all asked for it. You're all fired from the Utah assignment. Fly back to Washington this moment, where your next assignment will be to work on senators and congressmen to eliminate those major threats to us, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. If you don't do a better job of silencing them

than you have done on the Association for Mormon Letters, our mission will prove a total failure.

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Notes

1. What is printed here is fairly close to what was said on the lucky day of Friday the 13th of January. But I've also included some points that were cut to save time.

2. While I was preparing for this talk, I consulted a variety of biographies, autobiographies, and collected sermons of our leaders, looking for references to literary works or arguments for their value. It won't surprise most readers to learn that President David O. McKay won my "contest" hands down. Indeed, I found more relevant and informed references and quotations in one volume of his discourses than in any ten of the others.

3. Okay, okay, so I cheated a bit. Actually Twain wrote not Stephen King but William Tweed—Boss Tweed, the financier. But back to Smoother!

4. You may remember that Booster was in charge of the entire American education establishment throughout this century, with the following motto, pasted above the desks of two thirds of American education administrators and teachers. "Your assigned task is to stand to one side of the ladder of success, and goose students as they climb." If you keep *yourself* humble as you learn from that master of pride, all will be well.

5. As all the world knows, this is what the great editor Maxwell Perkins said to Wolfe, cutting hundreds of pages.

The Vocation of a Mormon Teacher

Neal W. Kramer

Wayne C. Booth's career as a critic, literary theorist, and leader of the Modern Language Association has been extraordinary. His contribution to the world of contemporary letters has few parallels. He has edited three and authored eight books, at least three of which are masterpieces of literary criticism and theory: *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961), *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979), and *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988). This public career, of course, manifests itself primarily outside the classroom, though he has also spent much of his professional life on the inside. At the University of Chicago, among his many honors, Booth has also received the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, reserved for faculty members who are deemed the finest teachers by undergraduate students in the College. As one looks at his career, his ongoing commitment to undergraduate and graduate teaching separates him from many of his scholarly peers. His outstanding efforts to teach freshmen and prepare seminars for high school teachers further allow him to stand apart. This abiding commitment to teaching arises in part from his Mormon upbringing, which instilled a sense of integrity that has led him to refer to his own teaching as a calling or a "vocation," rather than simply a profession.

My remarks today will focus on three general themes of teaching as a vocation, a sacred calling, that stand out in my experience with Booth and his work: (1) inspiration, (2) criticism, and (3) personal concern. Please allow me some moments of rather personal reflection as I discuss the vocation of a Mormon teacher.

Inspiration

In the fall of 1974, I had the good fortune to enroll in a freshman English course that had a

collection of essays entitled *Now Don't Try to Reason with Me: Essays and Ironies for a Credulous Age* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970) as a secondary text. Throughout the semester, we had the delightful opportunity to read essay after essay by a "stylish polemicist, strikingly vigorous, and sane." At least that's what the blurb on the back cover said. Conversations in class often led to students taking sides, not only about the politics of each essay, which struck some as decidedly too liberal and open-minded, but also about what the author meant. His tone was difficult to interpret. When was he being ironic and when straightforward? I soon prided myself on being able to sort out the ironies and impress my teacher, if not my fellow students, with my intellectual skill.

The day of reckoning came when we read an essay from Section 3, "The Last True Church." The author began the section with a series of epigraphs (the most intriguing of these today was attributed to a 1969 honors student from Wellesley named Hillary Rodham), including a brief quotation attributed to Joseph Smith: "The glory of God is intelligence" (172). Since we were attending a university with the same motto, my classmates were soon engaged in an entirely new debate. Was this author a Mormon, and if he was, was he a believer? Did his essays reveal apostasy or belief? Not surprisingly, the only evidence against him turned out to be his commitment to what we call liberal education. The "liberalism" implied in that name, including critical thinking, a certain brand of skepticism, the openminded search for truth, and a desire to carry on a dialogue with the Western intellectual tradition in literature, art, religion, and philosophy was simply too much for some of my classmates. I suppose it seemed awfully radical to students in a university that had prided itself on having had little or no campus unrest and sending many of its young men patriotically off to Vietnam. The essays implied a need to question

authority that *was* more liberal than about half of them were accustomed to. For them, he was much too liberal to be a good Mormon and anyone who thought as he did was in danger of losing a testimony.

For me, however, the essays brought an exciting rush of enthusiasm. I came to BYU in awe of professors who brought keen intelligence and deep faith together in ways I had never thought possible. My encounter with the inferred author, Wayne C. Booth, opened an entirely new vista. There were professors beyond BYU who still took Mormonism seriously. Their intellectual pursuits did not necessarily lead them to deride their faith or the church in which they were raised. I did not have to become a lawyer after all. I could make a career of doing what I most loved, including reading philosophy, novels, and poems and teaching the ideas to others. In short, I could become a guardian of the tradition of liberal education for the Mormons I most cared about. The next semester, I changed my major to English.

Well, what did this person say to inspire me so? Allow me to give you a taste. From an essay entitled "Knowledge and Opinion":

If you will think back over most of the textbooks you have used in college in the light of what has been said so far, you will see why they are so deadly dull: they are full, for the most part, of opinions rather than of ideas. In the study of literature, for example, of what conceivable use to you is another person's opinion about a book which you have not yourself read? For all purposes except tea talk the opinions of others about a book are positively dangerous, unless you have read the book and can thus rebuild or incorporate the opinions into genuine ideas of your own. (84)

In short, insofar as you hold your opinions about any subject in isolation from the thinking processes which produced those opinions, they are never true, even if they are very popular or in the vanguard of "current thought." (85)

Today I readily recognize the influence of John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty" here. But the formulation is decidedly Booth's, encouraging careful reading of valuable books, hoping to generate

ideas. He challenges the superficiality of many "academic" conversations about books we have carelessly looked at once (or never) and then left behind. This Booth encourages me to read and reread, with intellectual care, the works I teach, with an eye to making the classroom a repository of ideas, my own but especially my students'.

Let me move on to some other examples, taken from that section we used to argue about and an essay entitled "The College as Church: or, Screwtape Revived." The essay, modeled after C. S. Lewis's famous *Screwtape Letters*, contains correspondence between Dr. Harvey P. Sellout, Vice President of Surrogate University, and Screwtape, Lord of the Underworld, after they have made a pact in which Sellout has, well, sold out to the forces trying to undermine liberal education.

My dear Sellout,

I was delighted to learn that you have been promoted to Vice-President. The mere fact of your appointment to a newly created office is of course a triumph for our side: as you know, the enemy has always tried to maintain simplicity in university organizations, on the theory that responsibility for the pursuit of truth, wisdom, or aesthetic experience should be clear and unequivocal. Now that with your appointment the university has eight vice-presidents and fourteen deans, your opportunities to create confusion are practically unlimited. (177-78)

I cannot imagine that anyone here would recognize Screwtape's influence at any institutions of higher education in the Beehive State. And this spoken by an assistant dean!

As Sellout becomes more entrenched in his new position, Screwtape offers ever clearer advice about how to undermine good teaching (and liberal education) and replace it with an interesting counterfeit, a version of mediocre and undisciplined popularity masquerading as profundity:

There are four slogans to repeat on all occasions:

a. Each [person] is entitled to his own opinion, so why bother to discuss it or read about it?

b. All ideas can be explained in practical terms as filling psychological needs in their

originators, so why bother about them as *ideas*?

c. Every thinker has been refuted by some other thinker, so why bother about him as *thinker*?

d. What the world needs is [people] of passionate commitment to causes. The effort to think a problem through, or to think at all, is a way of putting off action. (181)

Screwtape suggests the following list for dealing with students:

In everything you say to students, suggest the following:

1. They are the pure in heart and everybody else is corrupt.

2. They have nothing to learn: in fact, as one of our best men at Chicago said during our recent sit-in, "In these matters you (students) must be the teachers of the faculty."

3. Encourage them in the notion that when they lie or cheat it is youthful highjinks, or justified white lying in the noble cause of building the future.

4. Praise them for wisdom, maturity, and a promising spirit whenever they follow their impulses blindly. Remind them that members of the true church naturally, impulsively, do the right thing, so long as it is in the name of some abstraction about the future.

5. Do everything you can to encourage them in the belief that the only reality is political, and that every value *now* should be subordinated to the nobler world to come. (182-3)

In this last list, you can easily recognize the imprint of Karl Popper. Disconcertingly, though, there is also a good chance that you might recognize a common ethos of today's English classroom in these lists. Is it possible that we have finally come to the point that we so coddle the students and fool ourselves about intellectual standards that almost anything goes in the contemporary university?

Perhaps one final quote from Old Scratch will allow us to evaluate whether we do any better today than the audience seemed to be doing over twenty years ago:

In all faculty-student contacts, by the way, you should teach the students to think of themselves as academically at least the equals of

the faculty, since the faculty are, as they like to say, only human. If the faculty are kept busy enough with routine classes, committee meetings, and socials, they will, of course, steadily deteriorate intellectually, and the students will find plenty of evidence that they are equal, or lower.

As ever,

Screwtape (185)

We might be tempted to think of Booth as terminally clever if the criticism did not cut so close to home. He outlines our most common temptations and our worst vices. And he does so without pulling too many punches or becoming hopelessly preachy. His work is an inspiring reminder of why teaching the liberal arts, even among the Mormons, is so important.

Criticism

In the fall of 1978 I walked into the social science research building on the campus of the University of Chicago. I made my way upstairs and into a beautiful seminar room with a large oval table, around which were seated twenty-five graduate students in English and law. We were there to learn all about "Interpretation of Intellectual Texts" from James Boyd White of the Law School and Wayne C. Booth. My dream of learning from the very best was about to come true. My idol sat almost close enough to touch.

Our first assigned text was *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974) by Jacques Barzun. Booth was to lead the discussion, and the class was all abuzz as he walked in. His first question felt a little peculiar. He asked us to turn to the last few pages of the book, which a number of us had not yet read. He called our attention to the following sentence: "Meanwhile the use of abuse we make of art impels us, as individuals forward or back" (148).

A spirited conversation ensued as we discussed possible meanings. I can't remember who was more creative in interpreting, the aspiring literary critics or would-be lawyers. I can remember, however, my contribution to the discussion, as I focused on explaining how the "use of abuse" could deepen our understanding of art. I was on a roll. The other students were impressed with my

critical dexterity. Could it be that another BYU student was on his way to making good in the big city?

Booth halted the discussion before it lost all intellectual coherence. With a slight gleam in his eye, he pronounced the proper interpretation. Dumbfounded at his intelligence, and our stupidity, we learned that this was a clear example of—a typographical error! “Of” should actually read “or.” “The use *or* abuse of art”

The blunt, even harsh, reminder of our fallibility and of the distance between Booth’s skills and ours was an invitation to become better rather than a badgering attack on our fledgling intellects. It taught us to think much more carefully about all aspects of the text. It challenged us to become critics.

A nineteenth-century philosopher described the “serious and not unproblematic qualities” of critics as

the certainty of value standards, the deliberate employment of a unity of method, a shrewd courage, the ability to stand alone and give an account of themselves. Indeed, they admit to a pleasure in saying No and in taking things apart, and to a certain levelheaded cruelty that knows how to handle a knife surely and subtly, even when the heart bleeds. They will be *harder* . . . than humane people might wish. . . . (Nietzsche 134)

Booth knows how to handle the knife, but with a twentieth-century dexterity that maintains standards without moving toward dogmatism, with a hard intellect that allows even the objects of his most withering criticism to maintain their humanity.

The following analysis of the state of the English profession from *The Vocation of a Teacher: Rhetorical Occasions 1967-1988* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) provides a good example:

There’s a lot of talk in America these days about how we professorial ignoramuses have failed to teach you student ignoramuses how to write. Supervisors of Ph.D. dissertations blame college teachers, college teachers blame high school teachers, and the public blames us all. But most of the complaints I see from the public are trivial, concerned only with spelling

and grammar. The real failure we ought to be concerned about is that hardly anyone seems to be concerned with writing in the sense of composition—composing in the sense of testing, with hard mental labor, whether ideas really fit together. The writer who matters to us is the one who has faced honestly what happens when ideas are recovered and set free in a free mind. (185)

This straightforward passage promises first to show us how the public simply misunderstands who we really are, offering us the near-platitude that the simple public thinks of writing only in superficial or trivial terms. Once we have recognized that, we are free to keep doing whatever we have done before, because we know better. But Booth will not leave well enough alone. He turns the tables on our smugness. We prove to be even worse than the public thought. We have failed to train even the best students to really think, to engage ideas as they ought to be engaged.

What then ought we to be seeking? How should we write and think?

[I]t is the mark of an educated, free mind to struggle with its seeming incompatibles and to try to remove them without cheating. And it is one mark of anyone with this special kind of freedom that he has developed some skill in doing it: some capacity to take the various notions in his head, clarify them, sharpen them, reshuffle them in application to the manifold new situations that come thrusting at him from all directions. (186)

[I]t is the main task of education to help us see our contradictions clearly and, more importantly, to teach the methods of bringing contradiction to the surface, of working out genuine harmonies, and of presenting the results persuasively to our fellow men. (188)

I want to suggest that in America today one purpose that is legitimate for some occasions has been allowed to intrude harmfully on too many occasions where it is not only inappropriate but destructive: I mean the aim of conveying information, *of covering material*. We are an information-burdened society, and the loading of information into minds conceived as memory banks has come to dominate far too much

of our educational practice. (212)
Each quotation is deceptively simple. But the implications are clear. Too much of the training we give and receive in institutions of higher education is not liberating, does not develop and hone critical intelligence. We are neglecting higher-order intellectual skills and replacing the chance to teach them with poor excuses for liberal education based on information-mongering or even pooh-poohing important contradictions in ideas that need to be clarified or harmonized if we are to live well.

Booth explains the value of critical thinking in exciting terms in his freshman composition textbook, *The Harper and Row Rhetoric: Writing as Thinking, Thinking as Writing*, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991):

It is sobering to think how many people become victims of whichever huckster gets to them first. They buy the clothes, cars, food, and entertainment that the ad writers tell them to buy. It is even more sobering to realize that these people may be equally vulnerable to manipulation of their ideas—and their votes.

Thus it turns out that learning to think critically about the way powerful language is used in our culture is really the same as learning to think about the culture itself: about its successes and failures, about its paths of opportunity (for some) and its dead-end alleys of defeat (for others). Neither you nor anyone else can be free without making choices, and the person who is seduced and “stimulated” into behavior by commercial ad makers is *not* making independent choices. In a society of such people community is not a matter, as it should be, of dreams developed in discussion. Instead, it gets replaced by groups who share spending and purchasing patterns: Our community becomes tied together by a shared taste in consumer goods as that taste is shaped by ad makers and hucksters. If such a world is not the kind of world we want to live in, vote in, and rear children in, then it is up to us . . . to acquire the critical skills and insights that can help us create another and better world—and also create more rewarding lives for ourselves and for those who must deal with *our* words. (273-74)

We ought to admire the hope for an educated community of shared standards of excellence that is promised to the graduates of our colleges in these passages. The promise of sharing ideas grand enough to transform our families and communities surely connects these ideas to Mormonism itself, with its hope for a better world through conversion.

The Personal Touch

Winter quarter of 1980 found me back in Booth's direct presence, this time in a seminar on ethical criticism taught at his home. I recognized a number of fellow interpreters of intellectual texts from two years before. Winter in Chicago can be very depressing. The university sometimes refers to itself as the “gray city,” but for me in 1980 it was becoming the grim city. I had just passed my preliminary oral exam, was struggling mightily with Latin, and had a time-consuming job. We were also expecting our third baby and carrying the usual church workload. I was feeling put upon by the reality that my classmates all appeared to have less to do than I did.

The course in ethical criticism was very stimulating. I was especially interested in writing about sin and its consequences in nineteenth-century novels. But every time I thought I was ready to write, something more pressing would come up. And I was being progressively more intimidated by my peers. They knew what they wanted to do. Their papers were better prepared and more stimulating than mine. And Booth liked *them* better.

The ninth week found me scared to death. Our new little girl, Megan, was born. What an exciting occasion, but my ideas weren't coming. I was wearing out. Who was I and where was I going? I went to the sixth floor of Harper Tower to see Mr. Booth.

We sat and chatted for awhile. He's always friendly and supportive. During a lull in our superficial conversation (I had skirted the real reason I came), I finally blurted it out. I came to Chicago confident in my abilities to succeed, but the pressure was sapping my enthusiasm and confidence. I wanted to be an intellectual and teacher. I wanted to write and think like my idols,

but it wasn't happening at all like I had foreseen it. What was I to do?

If I had thought Booth was going to solve all my problems and carefully map out a course that would guide me through the rest of graduate school, I was mistaken. In fact, he didn't say much to reassure me about my skills or my ability to succeed. Instead, he asked a simple question: "Have you prayed about it?" And it was the right question.

I mentioned earlier the sense I had had years before that the idea of a serious intellectual who respected faith has been crucial to my choice to give up law school and turn to the academy. This was the culmination of my quest. Booth did respect my faith, as he respected my quandary. Recognizing that I could not go on without some spiritual support and understanding was a tribute to his empathy and personal concern for each of his students. Had my friend Bill Monroe asked the same question, the answer would necessarily have been different, but the concern would have been equal.

A rather different story from Booth's journal makes the same point. We intrude here in the middle of a conversation between teacher and student "hopelessly short on natural ability":

"Let's look at it this way. Have you never enjoyed . . . ?"

No, he has never enjoyed . . . whatever I name.

"When we were talking about the fat woman in [Flannery O'Connor's] 'Revelation' [*he* is fat], did you . . . ?"

No, he did not.

Finally, in desperation: "Well, let's stop talking about the course for a while. When you're not being nagged by teachers like me, what do you really like to do?"

He looks even more withdrawn than before—not really hostile, exactly, just passive with a touch of sullenness.

"Isn't there *anything* you really like to spend your time at, anything that grabs you?"

In such moments, one "grabs" for whatever slang one happens to have available—always at least ten years behind whatever the student would recognize as the way his kind of person

talks.

A pause. Then: "I like to watch football on TV."

"Well, then." Hearty now. My opening! The prospector has found his lode. "How would you feel about writing your next paper about—ah—whatever it is that—ah—grabs you about the—ah—current football scene . . . ?"

I am cursing myself for not even knowing which teams are which.

"No. I don't think I could do that."

The hour ends. I am exhausted. He leaves without thanking me for my unsuccessful try. (*Vocation* 223)

I suspect the poor student didn't have a clue that the teacher was trying anything, except perhaps his patience. The scene is a gentle reminder that even the very best teachers sometimes fail. But the little curse for not knowing team from team, even though it probably did not result in a subscription to *Pro Football Weekly* or season tickets to the Bears, still illustrates concern. And even a fumbling concern is infinitely better than no concern at all. But the story doesn't end here.

I learned, a year later, that he had survived, after a disastrous quarter or so. . . . In his fourth year, I met him on campus . . . and he told me that it was only when he got into my *colleague's* humanities course that things began to make sense. *Somebody* got to him, but not me. (223)

I enjoy the regret in that last phrase—"but not me." The drive to want to be the best teacher every student ever had, and the arrogance to believe you can do it, makes every new semester or quarter an exciting challenge. It keeps the profession alive. One last quotation from a teacher's journal:

The phone rings and it is the dean telling you that you are to receive an award for excellent teaching, based partly on the students' evaluation forms and letters of praise. You glow for a few minutes or hours or weeks, but sooner or later you remember just what you have always said about the unreliability of student evaluations. And before long your triumph turns to ashes and thence—if you are lucky—to an ironic awareness that you just

don't know whether you are any good or not.
(232)

Booth's humility and understanding temper the arrogance I spoke of a moment ago, but not at the expense of commitment.

I find in the collection of anecdotes and quotations above an extraordinary portrait. The inspiring intellectual who moves idealistic young people toward a grand profession in the academy. The keen and hardened critical intelligence that demands hard work and careful thinking. The teacher with humane concern and deep personal caring. These three together invite our respect, but not simply because we admire them so much. They represent a life and vocation that are deeply fulfilling, that are good because they have intrinsic value. Mormonism teaches us to seek out that which is virtuous, which is good because of what it is. One makes teaching a vocation by living to enjoy the intrinsic goodness of the enterprise and its results. Such was the tradition Wayne C. Booth inherited from P. A. Christensen and Karl Young at BYU and Richard McKeon and Ronald S. Crane at Chicago. He has modeled it for his students, Rick Duerden, David Paxman, and David Cowles, who have brought it back to its Mormon roots in the West. It is a tradition we all should cherish.

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Keeping Company with Wayne Booth: Ethical Responsibility and the Conduct of Mormon Criticism

Gideon Burton

My mission call left me with several restless months to kill prior to donning my Mr. Mac suit and entering the ranks of the shaven and the sure. One day, after rummaging through bins of remaindered books in BYU's bookstore, I ended up spending ninety-nine cents for a slim volume called *Letters to Smoother, etc.* I hope one day a book of mine is remaindered in such a fortuitous way, for this report of a 1980 BYU Symposium on the Humanities included a statement by the visiting critic Wayne Booth during a question and answer session that shot through me like a column of light in a shadowed grove. In answer to the perennial question, "When will there be a great flowering of Mormon arts?" he answered, "We won't get a great artistic culture until we have a great critical culture" (32).

Never did any passage of criticism come with more power to the heart of a man awaiting a mission than this did at this time to mine. I reflected on it again and again. I kept company with the idea, returning to it, conversing with it, embracing it like a brother. I had always held it to be axiomatic that Mormonism should be able to provide an engine for powerful art, engaging art, art that would do more than flatter other Mormons but would prove a catalyst to people's lives and perspectives on either border of membership. Having imbibed into the nuclei of my cells the charge and blessing given to Mormon artists by President Kimball in 1977¹ and the prophecy by Orson Whitney of the glorious future he foresaw for Mormon letters,² I have with many others awaited and looked for those bright artistic and literary stars that will lift us into that realm where the power and depth of our religion combine with the power and depth of the arts we relish. Yes! We will have Shakespeares and Miltons of our own!

Obviously, if we are to give more than lip service to the tremendous possibilities inherent in that alluring synthesis of Mormonism and good art, we must encourage Mormon artists. But we must also focus consciously on creating a climate in which good art is understood, appreciated, and encouraged. Otherwise, just what are the chances that a Mormon audience—too often having grown up on Edward Guest's doggerel, *Especially for Mormons*, and the "paraliterature" of pulp sentimental fiction—would actually recognize such a distinguished literary light were he or she actually among us? Not to be cynical, but I have imagined that if given truth serum, certain Deseret Book customers would confess their standard for good literature to be whether the book in question has a one-word title that names a smiling Mormon girl on its cover. Who knows? Maybe Shakespeare could become known enough to be recognized and valued by the Mormon public if *Much Ado About Nothing* were to be retitled *Beatrice* and Emma Thompson were put on the jacket wearing a pink angora sweater. But in approaching sarcasm, I begin to distance myself from the method and message of Wayne Booth's exemplary criticism.

In *The Company We Keep* and in his earlier work, *Critical Understanding*, Booth lays out principles for having the best discussions about literature that are possible, the most desirable kinds of conversation. Such healthy verbal exchange can create the climate in which lives and arts together flourish. "To me," he says in *The Company We Keep*, "the most important of all critical tasks is to participate in—and thus to reinforce—a critical culture, a vigorous conversation, that will nourish in return those who feed us with their narratives" (136). If the creation of art is often depicted as an egotistical pursuit, then Booth portrays the craft of

criticism as a communal one: something we do together because we enjoy the conversation and because we can both sup and supper supply; we may nourish in return those who feed us with their narratives.

Notice that Booth compares narratives to food: stories, and our stories about our experiences with stories, are something we consume to do us good, to provide us with something that is essential, daily, for our well being—just like carbohydrates or calories. And while the occasional story may give our souls indigestion, the best purgative is a conversation in which one can—forgive the literalness—“get it all out.” Isn’t this the case? When you first read *I Spy a Nephite* (Pat Bagley’s Mormon spinoff of the *Where’s Waldo* series) and were so disturbed by its depictions of the sheer ontological presence of so many crowds of people, wasn’t your reading redeemed when your child finally pointed out to you where Norman the Mormon was hiding in that cultural hall tableau? My example is facetious, but the principle is not: people make sense of art—good, bad, or otherwise—only by talking it through with others. We ought to give more credit to the legitimacy of that informal and everyday procedure. After having experienced some art or literature, we are regularly eager to share, to express an opinion, to work through what bothered us, or to praise what pleased us. We already make it a habit to come to terms with the things we experience by expressing our judgments in conversation. Booth gives attention to the dynamics of this process, pointing out how the meanings and interpretations we derive are arrived at together with others and that these are subject to change as we receive new information or hold new conversations. In *Company* he has coined the word “coduction,” describing this process of mutually figuring things out. Booth collapses the difference between arriving at our judgments and defending them, for the two activities become one in the process of coduction: you make assertions and provide reasons, as do I, and together we synthesize a meaning unavailable to us without that alternate point of view (73). To return to the food metaphor, we each bring different ingredients to the mix, and the meal takes on a different flavor

each time it is renewed.

Achieving the critical culture that Booth claims is necessary for the flowering of Mormon arts only happens as we exchange our stories and our accounts of our experiences with stories, compassionate-service-and-casserole-like, with our reciprocating neighbors. How else will Mormons attain the sort of good “taste” necessary to discern a Mormon Milton unless they are regularly “tasting” the stories all around them and also sampling the opinions of their siblings at the banquet? Some are wary over the word “symposium” nowadays, but it means literally to drink together. Its etymology summons up the image of ancient Greeks gathering to share a meal as they share their thoughts and readings. That’s the kind of culture that fosters good art—one in which we are hospitable both to one another and to one another’s storytelling. Bruce Jorgensen, in his 1991 presidential address to this body, urged us to consider hospitality as a fundamental metaphor defining Mormon criticism. Criticism as hospitality nicely combines the metaphor of food with Booth’s metaphor of conversation. Jorgensen emphasized remaining open to the stranger, welcoming him or her to our table in the ancient custom of entertainment that included an invitation to “Let the Stranger Say,” as Jorgensen’s remarks were titled.

Booth partakes of this spirit of openness but also explores the ethical dangers of remaining too open, a qualification that would satisfy another past president of AML, Richard Cracroft, who urges us to train our ears to discern the authentic Mormon voice. After all, just as there are some foods that are not healthful, certain stories or artistic works may be too caloric, too sumptuously fatty, or even dangerously poisonous. Certainly all foods are not of equal value, neither gustatorily nor nutritionally. And we have our Word of Wisdom to caution us against imbibing certain substances altogether. Without due attention, we could end up consuming art that might cause an unhealthy addiction, or by consuming indiscriminately we could end up with what I call “Chuck-A-Ramaitis,” an ailment that comes about when we mistake the banquet of literary delights for an all-you-can-eat pig trough. If we Mormons learn in holy

places to provide ourselves constant nourishment to mind and body, we can only suppose that a discriminating diet should govern *all* our appetites. When we accept the basic assumption that art has stirring and strong effects on minds and souls, we cannot be too flip to chime in with *chacun son gout*, "to each according to his or her taste."

No, taste does not come about just by tasting, but by testing, by proving the worth of all things literary and holding fast to that which is true. It requires a critical culture committed to a refining process that heightens our powers of discrimination, a culture, according to Booth, of "those who are willing and able to judge whether a given work of art is virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy, and will thus know whether to seek after more things of that kind" (32).

In Booth's address last night, he repeated this criterion but qualified his definition of a critical culture by adding an important factor: such a culture must include hosts of would-be writers who do not simply read and assess but who also try their own hand at poetry or fiction. Consequently, such will have a crafting, not just a crafty, knowledge of the arts they read. In that spirit, I have penned this sonnet in which I explore Orson Whitney's vision for Mormon arts:

Shakespeares of Our Own - I
 If Mormon's book so thick with life invites
 Ourselves, our seed, our world to Christ to come,
 What need we train on Shakespeare's tome our
 sights,
 Our hopes, our time? What vain and greedy sum
 Can we unto the gospel pure append
 When faith, repentance, water, spirit speak
 With eloquence divine? What need to blend
 The din of actors' drone, from fictions seek
 The sins of lust o'erblown, the frictions proud:
 Revenge, deceit, immodest rage and crime?
 What bawdy bodies boldly bent or loud
 Can thoughts redeem, who evil's actions mime?
 A Shakespeare of our own would prove a shame,
 To foul us in, not move us from, our blame.

My sonnet worries over the negative effects of the arts, especially in contrast to the purer sources

of edification offered to us in the house of Mormon faith. Hand-wringing over what evils art can effect is a classic commonplace that goes back to Plato. Ironically, it is this same concern over the moral effects of the arts that also constitutes one of the prime tenets of their justification, especially within the tradition of the humanities. Literature and art have long been held to be humanizing, life-affirming, even culture-building. As Booth points out, it is the moral dimension to art that is the operating assumption upon which so many people read or teach literature: literature is supposed to be good for you—not just good for your mind, but for your character as a whole.³ Certainly Mormon critics have been unashamed in championing the potential moral goodness of literature, as Edward L. Hart did in a Brigham Young University Centennial lecture called "The Need Beyond Reason." There, rehearsing conventional arguments for the study of literature and language against opposing utilitarian views, Hart appealed to Latter-day Saint values and to their sense of the eternal consequences of education: literature and language lead to the "enlargement of souls" (3). Hart's opinion is representative of views held among those Latter-day Saints who value both their religion and literature: reading literature is a vital enterprise with beneficial moral consequences.

Wayne Booth situates himself squarely within this humanistic literary tradition that continues to hold forth such ideals regarding literature, but he is honest enough to acknowledge candidly the misgivings many have with art as they examine it from their own moral standards. To navigate this quandary he introduces us to ethical criticism, an approach that gives validity to our subjective, values-based assessments, claiming they are important to the conversation.

However, by opening up values-based assessments and making ethics a primary consideration in literary evaluation, Booth warns us against a dangerous form of pseudo-criticism that is possible once the doors of ethical criticism have been opened—the rendering of absolute judgments as to the goodness or badness of a given piece of art. This is not at all the purpose or method of ethical criticism as Booth lays it out. The most significant

part of Booth's ethical-critical approach is not that he encourages ethical, moral, or values-based assessments, but that he relocates the focus of ethical criticism, making its new object not the individual works of authors, but *the conduct we maintain in creating, experiencing, and discussing both art and criticism*. Let me repeat that to be very clear. The ethical critic is not that person who renders judgments on books or other art forms in reference to given moral values; rather, the ethical critic is he or she who examines the behavior of authors, readers, and critics as they go about the creation of, the reading or experience of, and the discussion about art.

Booth's ethical criticism, as will be soon apparent, has a long list of *dramatis personae*. It is crowded with people, each of whom has the obligation to fulfill certain responsibilities relative to the other players involved. Booth describes a web of responsibilities that obtain among authors, readers, and critics, leaving little room for facile, absolute, or dogmatic assertions of moral worth. This is a sober qualification to ethical criticism, for it does not let us get away with the conveniences of strong labels such as "good" and "evil," however practiced at or tempted to use them that we may be.

Let me provide an example of how absolute value judgments are both easily rendered and little useful for making sense of the complexities with which we experience art. Given the fact that Martin Scorsese's motion picture *The Last Temptation of Christ* was decried by Christianity at large for its apparently blasphemous depiction of Jesus, it would seem an easy thing to classify it as a "bad" movie, at least if you share Mormon or Christian values that include honoring Christ. If it is, how can we account for the experience of my Jewish friend in Los Angeles? Having taken the missionary discussions, she remained noncommittal because she could not believe in Christ. But upon seeing *Last Temptation*, in which Jesus is depicted in a very human way, doubting his Messianic calling and struggling in his mind with what he should do, my friend gained faith in Christ. "For the first time," she reported, "I could believe in the idea that someone could understand the inner

struggles that I've been through. The Jesus that I heard about from the missionaries was too good for me to believe that he could really understand me." I have never seen a clearer example of art having a moral effect: because she saw the film, she joined the Church. Can one gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles? How, then, can this good end, gaining faith in Christ and entrance to his kingdom, come about through a plainly "bad" work of art?

Booth provides us a way for understanding what happened to my friend by focusing on the moral quality of the *experience* of art. Given *her* background, given the questions *she* was then facing, that movie had that specific and beneficial effect upon her. The effect would differ with others, because of their individual perspectives and background. Are we prepared to acknowledge such experience and to base our critical standards on more than the work of art in itself? It becomes a harder task, with more complexities, but one wonders whether those absolute moral judgments about art works are all that moral if one leaves out of the picture such saliently important elements as the particular nature of the individual who experiences that art. It would seem that Mormon belief in the worth of individual souls, in the inviolability of individual agency, and in the process of learning truth for ourselves would predispose us to sympathize with Booth's focus on the audience of art.

Booth's emphasis on personal experience may at first blush appear to smack of relativism, but he keeps a sharp and resisting eye on that bugbear. Although individual experience of art may differ, this does not release individuals from their obligations to one another. For example, doesn't my Jewish friend have a responsibility not to generalize her experience to others for whom *Last Temptation* might live up to its name? Didn't Martin Scorsese, who is Catholic, have a responsibility to his Catholic brothers and sisters in his artistic choices? Don't we practicing Christians have a duty to Mr. Scorsese not to judge him uncharitably, whatever our conclusions about the movie? Do we have a responsibility to see *Last Temptation* before we can speak of it one way or another to our brothers and sisters?

This emphasis on responsibility should be attractive to Mormons. Deep in the heart of Mormonism is the idea that we must be accountable for our actions, as the second Article of Faith states.⁴ Moreover, our baptismal and temple covenants bind us to serve and honor others, extending our sense of responsibility beyond the personal realm.⁵ And because of our intended love for all humankind, we are responsible to serve them, hear them, know of them, understand them, perhaps even read them or write of them.

Booth's criticism doesn't let us get away with making judgments about art or with making art in the first place without examining the matrix of responsibilities that obtain among artists or authors, readers or audiences, and art works themselves. Booth categorizes and describes these responsibilities in chapter 5 of *The Company We Keep* (124-55). In order to make these responsibilities relevant to an LDS audience and to show the potent ethical dimension that Booth invokes, I will apply Booth's categories of responsibility in a series of questions relating to Mormon literature. If we, as Mormons, value responsibility, let us consider, through Booth's categories, what our responsibilities might be. I might add that it is important to recall that these questions do not stand by themselves; they qualify one another. Sometimes, especially when negative judgments are rendered, we myopically ignore all the other people who are involved in any piece of art—such as the artists themselves or other readers or viewers—and the responsibilities those people have in the larger picture. The following questions should help us not to do that. The first set of questions deals with authors; the second, with readers; the third, with critics.

Ethical Responsibilities of Authors

First, what are the author's responsibilities toward flesh-and-blood readers? If a Mormon missionary reads Béla Petsco's story of a missionary who fornicates, "One Damned Good-looking Woman," and chooses to imitate the protagonist, to what extent is Petsco responsible? What if, on the other hand, the story scares the real elder away from sin? How far is Petsco responsible?

Next, what are the author's duties to his or her work of art? Just how much do we owe, as authors and Mormons, to executing art well? Stanley Kimball complained in 1964 that "the most unqualified amateur with scissors and paste can throw together a poorly conceived, half researched, carelessly written, and popularized pot-boiler, find a publisher, and be acclaimed throughout Mormonism as an authority" (126). Is doing so unethical, given our religion's focus on the pursuit of excellence? Or does our duty to our youth or our eternal salvation, for that matter, place the doctrinal and doctrinaire element of such novels over the aesthetic ones? Kimball also pointed out something that Wayne Booth has observed in another setting, the problem Mormons have with congratulating any and all artistic efforts, whatever the result. When he was judging roadshow festivals, Kimball complained, the lowest possible category that he was allowed to assign was "good"—an indicator of Mormon reluctance to hold artists responsible for making good art. Well, then, if Susan Wakefield reviews *Charly* and *Sam* and finds these works by Jack Weyland to be artistically inferior, does Weyland have a duty to improve his artistry by the time *Stephanie* rolls off the press? Eugene England has criticized Jack Weyland and Shirley Sealy alike because they violate a standard that is both literary and Latter-day Saint: they neglect to create characters of sufficient detail and complexity that readers believe they actually have free agency instead of being "ciphers manipulated by the author for didactic purposes" (9-10). England's standard is provocative because it adds a theological dimension (the LDS belief in agency) to an aesthetic criterion (realistic portrayal of characters)—a dimension, perhaps, that implies obligation. Does a Mormon author have a moral duty to depict characters who realistically portray free agency?

Next, what is the author's duty to himself or herself as someone who has duties other than art? AML sponsored an important panel in its 1993 meeting called "Domesticity and the Call to Art," in which the real-world costs of writing poetry and fiction were honestly revealed. Can Julie Nichols justify not making a better dinner for her family

because she is tapping out another short story? Our responsibilities are never in a vacuum. We always owe duties to many parties. Where can art fit in legitimately?

Next, what are the duties of an author to himself or herself, in light of what art does to its creator in the artistic process? Montaigne said, "I have no more made my book than my book has made me" (qtd. in Booth 1988, 128). If David Dollahite creates a character, as he does in "Possum Funeral," who is a frighteningly irresponsible and petty Mormon father, does Dollahite have a responsibility to actively resist becoming the monster he creates? If authors inhabit the moral universes of the characters they create, should they be fortified with some kind of inoculation against being morally corrupted as they spend time depicting evil?⁶ How is it that evil can be depicted responsibly? Orson Scott Card's essay "The Problem of Evil in Fiction" is an interesting exploration on the necessity of depicting evil, but does a theory justifying evil's depiction make him less responsible for the distasteful depiction of graphic sex that readers encounter on the opening page of his novel *Lost Boys*? If authors tend to become like the characters they create, do they owe it to themselves to create literary characters that oppose their own weaknesses or that invite them to develop certain characteristics?

Next, what is the author's duty to himself or herself as a career artist? Is it ethical for a Latter-day Saint to consider herself a career artist? Given the necessity of planning and the difficulty of making a living as an artist, don't Mormons aware of their artistic potential owe it to themselves to craft a career plan that may involve short-term compromises, such as shoddy but well-paying writing jobs? Is it most ethical for a talented Mormon to refrain from or to attempt to become a Mormon celebrity, a big fish in a small pond?

Next, what does the author owe to those whose lives he or she exploits as "material"? Did Terry Tempest Williams observe a proper reverence toward her cancer-stricken mother when she wrote of her with both candor and eloquence in *Refuge*? Do depictions of sexuality risk violating responsibilities to one's marriage partner? Given the honor

due General Authorities, could a Mormon artist legitimately portray the lives, thoughts, concerns, or personal lives of these men? Would it ever be appropriate to base a Mormon stage play on the tragedy of a "fallen" General Authority, for example? Did Maurine Whipple sufficiently respect the person of Brigham Young in her rougher-than-correlated depiction of him in *The Giant Joshua*? Did she fulfill a duty by uncorrelating our image of him?

Next, what is the author's responsibility toward those whose labor is exploited or whose attention is neglected to make the art work possible? Should the Church sponsor artistic works as the NEA does, or as the Catholic church has, when those same funds could be spent on humanitarian aid, welfare, or missionary work? Should we ask for cultural refinement to be reinstated in Relief Society at the expense of the extra Spiritual Living lesson? Whose needs go unmet when Church or home resources are allocated to artists?

Next, what is the author's duty to society generally, or to the world, or the future? Given Mormon aspirations to bring about Zion, should Mormon writers be held accountable for the degree to which they bring about a Zion society? Or, perhaps, a better America? In light of Mormon concern over posterity, should artistic works be judged on their capacity to be enduring cultural legacies instead of ephemeral and consumable entities? What duty does Mormon poet Lance Larson owe to his son and daughter when he composes a poem?

And if Mormons have a duty to the future, do they have one to the past? Do Mormon writers need to invoke or come to terms with their pioneer heritage? Should Mormon writers be encouraged to make more significant attempts at portraying Nephite or Lamanite civilization in novels and stories? In light of their valuable literary output, what do we owe to Mormon and Moroni in terms of ours?

Next, what is the author's responsibility to truth? Dare they say what is truth? How responsible is Gerald Lund when he combines fictional characters with historical figures in his best-selling *The Work and the Glory* series—now up to five

volumes? Does the movie *Legacy* responsibly communicate the truth about the LDS pioneer experience if it substitutes fictional characters for historical ones? What if it adds a soundtrack to events that were not, in fact, accompanied by music? Are some truths, such as the life of Joseph Smith, most responsibly represented by multiple, differing artistic accounts? Can LDS art pretend to serve truth as well as or better than LDS history? Should the Association for Mormon Letters have a liaison to the Mormon History Association in order to be certain that historical fiction has historical legitimacy?

Ethical Responsibilities of Readers

As for the reader, what does he or she owe to flesh-and-blood writers? If we read Donald Marshall's *The Rummage Sale* and are somehow improved, do we owe him a carefully crafted fan letter? Do we have a duty to correct Walter Kirn because he unfairly represented Mormon immorality in "The Yellow Stars of Utah," a nationally published story? Or do we have a duty to applaud him for writing a conversion story that is artful, lyric, and unsentimental in his "Whole Other Bodies"? Do we owe it to that timid writer in our ward to get her work read by someone who could publish it? Do we owe it to that timid writer in our ward to keep her from publishing her story or to insist that it be revised? Do we have a responsibility to make sure that more than Wasatch Front authors are represented in LDS literary reviews? Do we have a responsibility not to critique someone's poor quality story too harshly in public if it could injure them, even if not libelously?

Next, what is the reader's responsibility to the work of art itself? Should I, a happily married Mormon male, feel an obligation to understand the complicated problems of Megan Stevens, the abandoned wife whose marriage has disintegrated without her knowledge in Linda Sillitoe's *Sideways to the Sun*? How much of myself must I turn over to Brian Evenson's bleak and nihilistic world in his *Altmann's Tongue*? Do I have to read clear to the end of the giant *Giant Joshua* to assess it fairly?

Next, what do readers owe to themselves in the reading process? Am I true to myself if I do not

resist falling all the way into the mixed morals of Levi Peterson's *Canyons of Grace*? Do I owe it to myself to read Neal Chandler's story, "The Only Divinely Authorized Plan for Financial Success in This Life or the Next" if I have dabbled in the dark art of Amway? Should I keep myself from reading Judith Freeman's *The Chinchilla Farm* because she graphically describes Mormon garments?

Next, what is the reader's responsibility to society? If I read Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite's recent short story collection, *Turning Hearts*, and find it to be as non-Mormon as it purports to be Mormon, do I have an obligation to assert and defend my conclusions to a public who might mistake the book as being representative of the real thing? Is an exposé ever an ethical option in Mormon society?

Ethical Responsibilities of Critics

Finally, and this is the site of ethical obligation most important to Booth, what are the reader's responsibility to other readers? If I read a review about a work that matters to me with which I starkly disagree, do I owe the reviewer a conversation in which I support my opinion? If Card's *Ender's Game* series moves me to understand better Mormon weaknesses in fearing alien influences to our culture, do I have a missionary-like obligation to convert others to my positive opinion, or perhaps even to justify to them the legitimacy of the science fiction genre in which it occurs? Does the Association for Mormon Letters have a responsibility to the Mormon public at large? Do literature-loving Mormons have an obligation to support organizations such as this one with their time, talents, and means? Do we as members of a society devoted to Mormon letters have a responsibility to apprise readers or writers when they seem to be violating obligations we recognize them to have?

These are potent questions. By focusing on readers' responsibilities to each other we are brought back to our starting point. "High artistic culture," said Booth in a 1980 article,

is made by those who have learned the habits of discrimination, the habits of criticism. Great music is composed only in cultures in which

many people have learned to recognize and reject mediocre music when they hear it; great literature is written only in cultures that have developed audiences who are willing to talk about differences of quality, to reward those who do best, and to "punish"—with neglect, at the least, and with painful criticism when necessary—whatever is second rate. . . .

Whatever else can be said about the great periods of religious art in the past, they have always occurred in conjunction with periods of great critical alertness in the "consuming public." (33, 32)

Wayne Booth has helped me realize that our public has been all too consumed with awaiting that Mormon Shakespeare, passively, instead of preparing for her (or him), actively. We have supposed individuals would come, savior-like, to usher in a new dispensation but have failed to see that our task is to establish those conditions in which great writers can be nurtured, encouraged, fostered, and recognized for what they have done. Collections of Mormon short stories and poetry have been titled *Greening Wheat* and *Harvest*. But we must till and tend the fields before we can expect to be heavy laden with nourishing sheaves. The sweat from Adam's brow came less from eating his bread than from planting, hoeing, and tending his crops. And I am certain that Eve would confess that conceiving her children was not the painful part of the child-bearing process. Like parents to a fruitful culture, we conceive it in a certain pleasure, but we must thank Wayne Booth for calling our attention to the all-important gestation period of that vision. I was going to continue this metaphor, calling the annual meetings of the Association for Mormon Letters a kind of prenatal ultrasound in an unusually long pregnancy; however, I will conclude instead with another sonnet, a counterpart to my earlier one:

Shakespeares of Our Own - II

Oh brave new world! No longer dim and cold
But warmed with knowledge strong and priesthood
sure

That Jesus Christ restored to Joseph, bold
Enough to beg of heaven his desires pure.

Can we, the true yet stripling church, request
Our liberal answering God to show us well
How we through consecration may be blessed
To dramas act and pictures paint and stories tell?
If Shakespeares are to be or not to be
Among ourselves, the saints of latter days,
We must, as Joseph, study, question, see
What virtues lay in Shakespeare's words and ways.
Before the Prophet's prayer was ever said
He long had savored well the words he read.

Just as Joseph Smith prepared for the glorious coming forth of truth and knowledge for which he was an instrument, so must we prepare for the glorious coming forth of Mormon artists. As Joseph studied the sacred texts, we must study our literary ones, testing their virtues and savoring their truths. As he listened to what many had to say on religion and then discussed it openly and frankly with many, so must we take in many kinds of art and discuss this openly with others. And perhaps, just as Joseph found miraculous, divine help in taking seriously the powerful words he read in the Bible, so might we receive miraculous, divine help as we take seriously the powerful literary words we read in other canons of writing. As we attempt this, conversing with one another thoughtfully and ethically as Wayne Booth has encouraged us to do, we will create that critical culture that will both foster and recognize the art and literature to which we aspire.

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Notes

1. "For years I have been waiting for someone to do justice in recording in song and story and painting and sculpture the story of the Restoration, the reestablishment of the kingdom of God on earth . . ." (Spencer Kimball 5).
2. "We will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own. God's ammunition is not exhausted. His brightest spirits are held in reserve for the latter times. In God's name and by his help we will build up a literature whose top shall touch heaven, though its foundations may now be low in [the] earth." (Whitney 206).
3. For a summary and refutation of this fundamental humanist stance, see Peter Thorpe, *Why Literature Is Bad for You* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980).
4. "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression."
5. The prophet Alma's remarks in Book of Mormon best express the obligations to others that we take upon ourselves through baptism: "[A]nd now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life . . . what have you against being baptized . . . ?" (Mosiah 18:8-9).
6. Consider, for example, C. S. Lewis's reservations regarding writing from the perspective of a devil. Inhabiting a "diabolical" point of view in his popular *Screwtape Letters* produced what Lewis called "a sort of spiritual cramp. The work into which I had to project myself while I spoke through Screwtape was all dust, grit, thirst, and itch. Every trace of beauty, freshness, and geniality had to be excluded. It almost smothered me before I was done." Preface, *The Screwtape Letters*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1961), xiii.

“Easy to Be Entreated”:
Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent
and Christian Communication

Grant Boswell

I first encountered Professor Booth's *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974) when I started my Ph.D. program in 1979. One of my best friends from graduate school told me that he owned the book when the book was recommended to us in our first seminar together. He said he had bought it solely on the basis of its cover. He had no idea what the content was, but he liked the picture. The cover is a photograph of three students engrossed in serious conversation over coffee. Perhaps the first lesson that Professor Booth wants us to take from this book is that Mormons should take their coffee substitutes more seriously.

I read the book twice during graduate school and am happy for the opportunity to have returned to it a third time for this essay. I believe, upon this my third reading, that it is a remarkably prescient book, foreshadowing many of the debates in the literary profession that have occurred since the lectures were given at Notre Dame in 1971. The book starts with a narration of an event that informs the entire argument; I will begin my discussion narrating an event that I hope will inform mine.

On June 11, 1993, Brigham Young University announced that it would terminate five faculty, two of whom had attracted much public attention and therefore were high profile cases. The university claimed that procedures were followed, facts considered, experts and peers consulted. Doubters claimed that the decision was based not on the facts but on political, religious, and personal motives. Students demonstrated and rallied, letters and editorials were written, discussions were held all over campus.

Interestingly enough *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* begins with an analogous event.

A popular professor's employment had been terminated. Students revolted and took over a building; and for the next sixteen days, they occupied the building from which they issued their demands. Not to be outdone, the administration and some faculty wrote their responses claiming reason, fact, evidence, procedure as their guides. In Booth's words:

Nobody now doubts that this event was disastrous, even though some would argue that it was an experience that we had to pass through. For many of the radical students it was disastrous—more than forty were finally expelled by a disciplinary committee. For the university it was disastrously embittering—only now [two years after the fact] has the normal level of tolerable mistrust between faculty and students been restored. If the main purpose of the university is learning and teaching, everyone concerned would say that the real university was diminished for many months. And even the most extreme students who at first claimed that their defeat was a victory, since at least “the university had been *polarized*,” found at the end that the sit-in had produced apathy in most other students, not unity and spirit. (9-10)

Although the events at BYU and at the University of Chicago are strikingly analogous, there are obvious differences. The BYU students didn't take over buildings and write obscenities on the walls. You can be only so radical at BYU. But I believe the consequences at BYU were equally disastrous: mistrust, apathy, bitterness. Booth analyzes this event as a rhetorical failure not simply of the participants, although there is blame for them as well, but a failure of the modernist paradigm that informed the entire event and most of this century.

Modernism for Booth is the schism of fact from value beginning with Descartes' philosophy of doubt and resulting in two modernist dogmas. The first is that the only way to know anything is by verifiable fact and cold, hard logic. Opinions, beliefs, values, and the like cannot be verified, so they are ruled out of bounds. A fact must be verified by holding it up to rigorous scrutiny and to systematic doubt. That is, the only way to verify anything is for the best possible minds to try to falsify it. If it can't be falsified, then it can be accepted as being verified. This dogma Booth labels "scientismic" (17).

The second modern dogma counters the scientismic with its own beliefs that logic, facts, and evidence are mere facades for other, more deeply seated motives such as power, desire, and prestige. This is the result of a fiercely romantic distrust of the rational and the willing adoption of the intuitive, the emotional, and the irrational. This dogma Booth calls the "Irrationalist."

For the adherent of the scientismic, communication must adhere to the standards of logic and evidence; all else is propaganda. For the irrationalist, all claims to rationality and evidence are opportunities for delving beneath the surface in what Paul Ricoeur calls "interpretation as exercise of suspicion" (32-36). The irrationalist can take nothing at face value; a cigar is never just a cigar.

In dogmatic encounters such as I described above, I hope we can see the futility of any attempt at communication, at reaching the other persons and changing their minds. The scientisist wants only what can be verified, a kind of Sergeant Friday — "Just the facts, ma'am." The intended audience of this factual appeal sees the facts as dodges of what really motivates the other persons and asks that they come clean, tell the truth, stop playing games. The situation is similar to what Wendell Berry in his wonderful essay "Discipline and Hope" sees in political discussions; there is a radical left, a radical right, and a radical middle (152). All sides are so rooted in their positions that they cannot entertain another point of view. Any real communication is impossible and the exchange quickly devolves to a bomb-lobbing contest. One side hurls a fragmentation grenade; the other side

takes cover, regroups, and launches an incendiary device. It escalates until the two sides run out of things to throw or until one side kills or dominates the other. Bystanders are either bored or are forced to cheer their side against the other; hence the apathy and the distrust. No one wins, nothing is accomplished; hence the bitterness.

For Booth this is a rhetorical failure because his definition of rhetoric precludes such an exchange. For Booth rhetoric is "a whole philosophy of how [humans] succeed or fail in discovering together, in discourse, new levels of truth (or at least agreement) that neither side suspected before" (10-11). His is "a view of rhetoric as the whole art of discovering and sharing warrantable assertion" (11). In essence, then, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* is occupied with the following two questions:

1. *How should [humans] work when they try to change each other's minds, especially about value questions?*

2. *When should you and I change our minds?—that is, how do we know a good reason when we see one? (12)*

The book is an examination of these questions in light of the consequences of modern dogmas and of the possibility of changing the modernist tendency to apply systematic doubt into a post-modernist opportunity to begin with assent. I will not attempt to summarize in a few pages what Booth has so thoroughly explored in his book. As persons of letters and members of this association, I will assume that you are already sympathetic to his arguments and will simply restate his conclusions to present to you the opportunity for assent that Booth foresees and urge that as Christians we have already the wherewithal to do as he suggests.

After a careful analysis of the preference of fact over value and after careful consideration of the consequences of doubt and of how it is that people make ordinary decisions, Booth concludes that the modernist philosophy of doubt is bankrupt because it is disastrous, is internally inconsistent, and because it is unnecessary. People make ordinary decisions just fine without it. Knowledge does depend on values and beliefs, and it would be impossible to know anything or even do anything

without them. Instead of "doubt pending proof," we are free to "assent pending disproof" (101). This is not an invitation to gullibility, and Booth is careful to explicate why this is so, but suffice it for this discussion to know that the consequence of a willingness to assent rather than to doubt is significant to the questions of changing minds (111).

From Booth's point of view, the self is no longer the transcendental ego of the Enlightenment striving for and isolated and alienated within Universal Reason. Nor is the self the brooding, intuitive genius of Romanticism, equally isolated and alienated. Instead, the self is "essentially rhetorical, symbol exchanging, a social product in process of changing through interaction, sharing values with other selves" (126). This view of the self changes everything for Booth: "[The individual] is essentially, we are now saying, a self-making-and-remaking, symbol-manipulating creature, an exchanger of information, a communicator, a persuader and manipulator, an inquirer" (136). And if humankind is essentially different once we reject the tenets of modernism and its philosophy of doubt, we can begin to ask different and interesting questions. Thus Booth suggests, "But if all [humans] make each other in symbolic interchange, then by implication they *should* make each other well, and it is an inescapable value in their lives that it is good to do it well—whatever that will mean—and bad to do it badly" (137). Hence a primary value of human existence is to be found in human rhetoricity—how it is we change our minds as well as others' minds.

Booth believes that at this juncture in history the postmodern, whatever that is, transcends "the shocks of negation that produced the modern temper" (201). We now have the opportunity to affirm rather than doubt as we go about changing one another's minds. This rhetoric of assent, by which we change our minds and remake ourselves in communities of shared values, enables the kind of communities based on tolerance and dignity that have long been envisioned, because assent makes discussion about beliefs and values possible, even necessary. As we discuss and argue opinions, beliefs, and values, we also learn to entertain the

reasonableness of beliefs, opinions, and values other than our own, even when we do not accept them. Thus the quality of our social relationships depends on the quality of our communication. Without the presumption of assent, we risk the rhetorical impasses of the modernist era and their disastrous consequences. With the presumption of assent, we hope for genuine community, though not total agreement. But why stop there? Booth poses this as another question: "Who or what made the universe such that it can be apprehended only in a shared language of values?" (136) Such a provocative question propels us into a consideration of how we as Christians respond to the word and to *the Word*, how it is that our communications configure our relationships both human and divine.

At this point I would like to pursue the reasoning of *Modern Dogma* to its reasonable conclusion for Christians. If the time is now ripe for us to consider how it is we change minds as we engage in symbolic interchanges, I believe that Christianity has something to offer in this matter. In essence I believe that Christianity is not a dogma, although Christians can certainly be dogmatic, and thus is not susceptible to the critique of modernist dogmas that Booth presents. I also believe the obverse: to the extent that a person is dogmatic, he or she is not acting as a Christian. Christianity is not a dogma in Booth's sense because the changeability of minds is integral to Christian salvation through repentance.

The issue of changeability of minds became an issue for Christianity in the fifteenth century when Lorenzo Valla, a fifteenth-century Italian philologist and humanist, wrote his *Collatio* and *Adnotationes*, or notes and commentary, on the New Testament. Valla applied a philological method to the Greek and Vulgate texts to determine critically what the text actually said. His method and temperament put him at odds with the Catholic Church. For example, in discussing 2 Corinthians 7:10-11, in which Paul speaks of repentance and the change that occurs to the repentant soul, Valla argues that no doctrine of penance is stated or implied in these verses. The King James version reads as follows:

10. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

11. For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

The Greek *metanoia*, "repentance," is translated in the Vulgate as the Latin *poenitentia*, "penance." The Latin suggests a weariness or annoyance that is not present in the Greek. The Greek verb *metanoew* means quite literally "to change one's mind." Other connotations include "reconsidering one's judgment" or "concern to become better after reflection" (Liddell and Scott 439; Bentley 64). This meaning is quite clear, Valla argued, in verse 11, and does not suggest a doctrine of penance, but merely a willingness to change one's mind. Erasmus repeated Valla's judgment in his New Testament and thus came under the same criticism from the church. He consistently translated the Greek as *resipiscite*, "Change your minds" (Bentley 169; Bainton 139). Later this point would be taken up by Luther. But the Greek is quite clear in its sense of repentance as a change of mind and heart. A godly sorrow moves us to repentance in that it causes us to change our minds. Repentance is a rhetorical act of assenting to the Word of words. Insofar as Christians must constantly be in a state of repentance, they must always be willing to ply their minds in order to change them; they must always be willing to assent to the Word.

As Christians this state of being places us under certain obligations in our communications. We are obliged to persuade all to come to Christ and to heed the Word and its goodness. (See 2 Ne. 25:23, Jac. 1:7, Eth. 4:12, Moro. 7:16-17.) But how does the Christian do this without dogmatism? The responsibility is similar for both speaker and hearer. Speaking of a heavenly wisdom James admonishes as follows:

13. Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a

good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. . . .

17. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy, and good fruits. (James 3:13, 17)

Likewise Alma urges that the followers of Christ be "humble, and be submissive and gentle; easy to be entreated; full of patience and long-suffering" (Alma 7:23). And at the time of Christ, Nephi longs for a people that would be "easy to be entreated" (Hel. 7:7). I do not believe that this phrase "easy to be entreated" means to make easy marks of ourselves or willing dupes. It does mean being patient, long-suffering, and submissive. It means being willing to hear the other out and consider the reasons and appeals carefully, deliberately, and considerately, setting aside for the moment ego, interest, prejudice, and ambition. It means being willing to change our minds, to assent pending disproof. The obligation of a Christian audience is to hear as faithfully as possible what is being said, to take it up deliberately, to be entreated by it easily if the reasons are good.

And as in most else, the Golden Rule also applies to the speaker: speak as you wish to be heard. Nowhere is the duty of the Christian rhetor more thoroughly spelled out than in Doctrine and Covenants 121:

41. No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

42. By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile.

The rhetoric of Christianity is not involved in any power play or any attempt at victory for its own sake. The Christian rhetor knows that if we are made in the image of God, we are made as the Word, in and by words, refashioned by the things we say and do to each other. And as we repent, changing our minds, vowing to do better upon reflection, we make each other better by our symbolic interchange, and so we edify one another (D&C 50:22). The state of mind for the Christian is assent, assent to the Word, and "inasmuch as ye

have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," he reminds us (Matt. 25:40). The Lord requires "the heart and a willing mind" (D&C 64:34). He requires this willingness of heart and mind to assent to him and to each other so that our communication can truly be the foundation for our relationships, both human and divine.

If Booth is right that postmodernity is a crucial juncture for improving human relationships, I believe that Christians need to leave their dogmatism behind and, as always, show the way by their example and their practice. Christian communication requires practice at assent and at being easily entreated. It requires a practice that becomes habitual. Because Booth gave the lectures that he reworked as *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* originally at Notre Dame, he ended the final lecture with an allusion to the Catholic Church and some of the rhetorical turmoil it was experiencing. I will end with his words, hoping that you can make the requisite translation for our own church.

I have met some rebels in the last four days here who talk as if salvation will be found only if the Church can be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the twentieth century. Many have been eager to show me that my audiences here will be just as secularized, fully as modernist, as I could find at my own university. Whatever the reasons, good and bad, for turning from traditional Catholic dogmas, I would hope that the turning would not be simply a rerun of the triumph of modernism. To catch up with Bertrand Russell is not enough for a modern Catholic or rebel-Catholic—not if one of the things we know is that beliefs are not disproved simply by asking whether we can prove them in the modernist sense.

In short, it would seem to me a pity, if in fighting the dogmas of premodernism, you were to fall at this late date from the arms of the Church into the thorns of modernism. I suppose that what I am asking, without being entirely sure that it is possible, is for a leap over modernist battlefields to the postmodern rediscovery that the primal symbolic act is

saying yes to processes like the wrenching one in which you are engaged. (203-04)

Our own church is sometimes embroiled in wrenching rhetorical turmoils that in many ways reflect the modern dogmas Booth outlines for us. For some the truth of the gospel will be proved beyond skepticism when the golden plates are returned or when the city of Zarahemla is finally located, when a founding document or artifact is discovered, when a historical enigma can finally be put to rest by incontrovertible fact, when the doctrine can be verified with tangible evidence. This is the scientismic dogma. For others any such claim is met with skepticism and distrust, as an opportunity for suspicion. This is the irrationalist dogma. I, together with Booth, would hope that this modernist wrangle of dogmas could be transcended by an invigorating yet long-suffering, a demanding yet loving rhetoric of assent in which the ease of being entreated is commensurate with the ease of His yoke, a burden borne lightly by virtue of the Word.

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Mormon Postmodernism: Worlds without End in Young's *Salvador* and Card's *Lost Boys*

Robert Bird

Joseph Smith's revision of the Pauline closing, "world without end" (Eph. 3:21) to become "worlds without end" (D&C 76:112), is a significant, ontological move. Specifically, Smith's closing provides an opening for contemporary Mormon literature to explore the possibility and implications of multiple worlds and realities.

Brian McHale, a Senior Lecturer in Poetics at Tel-Aviv University, argues in *Postmodernist Fiction* that the shift from modernism to postmodernism is a shift in philosophical emphasis. In modernism, the principal concern was epistemological: What do we know? How do we know it? and, How much can we trust our knowledge? (6-11). Modernism, for the most part, conflated the metaphysical world into the physical world and produced what is called, in Mormon literary circles, sophic literature. In the natural and psychological realism of modernism, even Mormon modernist literature, there was little room for the supernatural.

For example, Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* explores only the weak theological idea of togetherness; and its final, typically modernist, deathbed scene portrays the protagonist Clory—after realizing that she does indeed have a testimony of the gospel—merely concerned that her fingernails be manicured as she enters into the beyond. *The Giant Joshua* and most other modernist texts failed to portray anything beyond the natural world, beyond death or what Jean-Paul Sartre metaphorically called "The Wall."

On the other hand, postmodernism has moved away from epistemological concerns to those of ontology. Ontological questions concern the nature of reality and the possibility of multiple realities and plural worlds. The postmodernist shift in academics has resulted in the inclusion of multicultural literature and of genre fiction such as fantasy and science fiction. Ihab Hassan provides one possible definition of postmodernism as "a

response, direct or oblique, to the Unimaginable which Modernism glimpsed only in its most prophetic moments" (53). In other words, postmodern literature often creates worlds of wonder and of miracle and explores the supernatural.

The exploration of the supernatural and its often harsh juxtaposition with the natural world is a principal characteristic of postmodern literature. This movement encourages literature that is neither superficially faith-promoting, ignoring the difficulties of reality, nor convolutedly skeptical and disillusioned, unable to see beyond this terrestrial world.

By traveling among worlds, crossing over into other cultures and other realities, Mormon postmodernism affirms the intrusion and influence of one world upon another. The wall of modernism has come down; in its place only a postmodernist veil separates the human from the divine and this life from the afterlife. This veil is easily parted, allowing for revelation, manifestations of goodness and of evil, and glimpses into multiple realities.

The Mormon novel *Salvador* by Margaret Blair Young contains much crossing-over, overlapping, and blurring of worlds and realities in the common postmodernist zone of Latin America. *Salvador* is the first-person narrative of Julie (a recently divorced Mormon woman searching for her identity and her faith) who with her parents Chuck (a disillusioned, excommunicated apostate) and Emmie (a selectively orthodox Mormon who spouts optimistic clichés) travels from the snow-tipped mountains of Orem to the oppressive heat of El Salvador.

Julie, Chuck, and Emmie leave behind capitalist America and mainstream Mormonism to enter into the quasi-religious zone of Zarahemla, a place forged out of history, myth, and the Central American topos. The reason for their journey is to visit Uncle Johnny, the salt-and-pepper-bearded,

prophetic figure who lives in another reality of consecrated and polygynous jungle communities. Julie, Chuck, and Emmie fail to escape their reality completely, for capitalist America and the mainstream Mormon Church are present in El Salvador, embodied in Piggott, the district president who lives in a luxurious, servant-attended mansion.

Still, Julie and her parents experience in El Salvador the reality that "we Gringos see on the 6:00 news: that world of wars and quakes and starvation and little brown people with desperate eyes who were born to be part of Dan Rather's script" (71). The world that used to end "when 'Wheel of Fortune' begins" (71) had now become Julie's world. Yet this country of poverty and suffering is also a place of romance, religious discovery, and danger, where ancient ruins have been overgrown by jungle and where jaguars prowl in the night.

Julie escaped to El Salvador after filing for a divorce from an abusive husband, a divorce that Julie blames on her mother's idealized notions of marriage and the Church. Like her father, who served in Vietnam, Julie is disillusioned because of her exposure to excessive cruelty and evil, and she attempts to find hope and redemption by leaving her reality and traveling to a world of myth.

But besides natural danger, the mythical world in the jungle also abounds with human cruelty and evil. In his attempts to establish his dream of a religious Zion, her Uncle Johnny, though extremely charitable to the poor, domineers over his wife and tyrannically controls other women and his followers. Hints of murder and revenge pervade the narrative as Alberto, Johnny's illegitimate son and disciple, faces the Hamletesque dilemma of whether to heed the demands of his ghosts.

In the climactic scene of the novel, Alberto takes Julie to the temple ruins of Zarahemla where, Johnny claims, Christ preached to the Nephites. Alberto shows Julie pictographs on the wall that prove to him that this was the temple of Zarahemla; but Julie reads the signs, not as Lehi's vision of the tree of life, but rather as a human sacrificial ritual of the Mayans. A clash of interpretations and of realities follows which results in Julie's return to the United States, in Alberto's

disappearance into the landscape of myth, and in Johnny's denunciation as sinful.

Both Julie and Alberto profit from a clash of realities. Julie returns to the United States more mature and with an understanding of the miracles that her mother subtly works while seeming to be superficial and foolish. Alberto frees himself from Johnny's control and begins to develop his faith elsewhere. Johnny, on the other hand, is confronted and rebuked by the district president and others, although he still refuses to change his abusive nature.

Eugene England, in a blurb at the front of the novel, suggests that this work by Young is not yet the great Mormon novel but that it shows the way. May I suggest that the great Mormon novel will be one in which the realities of Julie and Alberto do not just clash and break apart but instead come together—thesis and antithesis—in a new synthesis, in a new world of logos and of mythos, a world in which a ruin could be both sacred temple and sacrificial altar.

A step beyond *Salvador's* clashing realities is Orson Scott Card's *Lost Boys* in which evil and grace intrude into this world from other ontological levels. Card creates a postmodern zone not in the jungles of Central America but in the workings of a computer game. Mystically using a computer game as an extension of his consciousness, Stevie Fletcher—an eight-year-old, Christlike boy—communicates with seven molested and murdered boys who are buried under the Fletchers' house.

In *Lost Boys*, a crossing over of realms or ontological levels occurs: from the natural realm with its greedy, perverse, but also good and charitable humans who are, at different times, kind, cruel, worn-out, and even insane; the realm of evil that is eternal and unexplainable; and the realm of the divine from which come supernatural manifestations and communication.

Card's text reads like detective fiction as the reader is invited to identify and name various types and degrees of evil which beset the Fletcher family. The principal question in this text is, What are we to do when we are confronted with evil? The narrative itself proceeds to provide possible answers.

As a postmodern work, the concern of this narrative is more ontological than epistemological. The tension of the novel arises, not because of an unreliable or limited narrator which delays the revelation of the cause of evil, but rather from the fact that the evil itself cannot be completely contained because it exists on a supernatural level. The reader is introduced to the real evil of the novel in a disturbing prologue, but because the prologue is discontinuous from the rest of the text, the evil seems to exist prior to the world of the narrative, to be distant and incomprehensible, and to make itself manifest in this world from a different ontological level.

Two possible explanations are suggested for the existence of this evil: abuse of the child character and his witness of what Freud calls the primal scene. The evil takes upon itself the name of "Boy," the term used by the father in his abuse of the child. The character takes that "word inside himself and it [becomes] the name for all his bad desires" (1). The evil grows within the character as it makes him play pranks, cheat on tests, even though cheating was unnecessary, and finally becomes too strong to be contained, bringing the character to molest and murder those who will be known as the lost boys.

But, as stated previously, though the abuse fosters the evil, the evil, like the prologue itself, already exists. Just as the prologue is a given, structurally preceding, independent of, and disconnected from the narrative, so the evil in this work is a given, an independent entity. As the connection between prologue and narrative is tenuous, so is any attempt to establish a direct or simplistic causal relationship between the abuse in the prologue and the manifest evil in the narrative itself.

After the prologue, the narrative begins with the Fletcher family moving from Vigor, Indiana, to Steuben, North Carolina. Moving away from the comfort zone of family and friends, the Fletchers gain a heightened awareness of the dangers and threats that abound, especially in a strange land. In response to these newly perceived threats, the three children—Stevie, Robbie, and Betsy—naturally turn to their parents—Step and DeAnne—for protection. Understandably, DeAnne attempts to

calm the children's fears by teaching that though they may be on their own, Heavenly Father watches over and protects them.

Step, reacting to what he considers a simplistic explanation of the workings of the divine, interrupts DeAnne: "God doesn't work that way. . . . He doesn't stop evil people from committing their crimes." After DeAnne rephrases Stevie's question as asking whether they are safe, Step elaborates on his previous response: "Yes, Stevie, you're safe, as safe as anybody ever is who's alive in this world. But you were asking about what if somebody really terrible wanted to do something vicious to our whole family, and the truth is that if somebody is truly, deeply evil, then sometimes good people can't stop him until he's done a lot of bad things. That's just the way it happens sometimes." What then, Stevie begins to wonder, is the role of God in protecting his children? Step concedes that "only in the long run" does God seem to get those who commit evil (14). This scene, which suggests the vulnerability of good to the attacks of evil, concludes with Step's partially comforting remark, "There aren't that many really evil people in the world" (14).

But the narrative forces the reader to question Step's concluding remark. The narrative abounds with evil people. At work, Step associates with the self-protecting, deceitful Dicky who tries to intimidate and manipulate Step, while making plans to steal Hacker Snack (Step's successful computer game) and with Gallowglass, a bright, young computer whiz who admits a sexual interest in children.

At church, the Fletchers are hounded by Dolores LeSueur, the prophetess in their ward, who claims to receive revelations for everyone. Most of the time, Dolores, as long as she gets her way, is harmless; but at times she intimidates others, as when she tells Stevie that his parents are unrighteous and are preventing him from accomplishing a great work. Even at school, Stevie is emotionally abused by a teacher who has allowed hatred to grow inside her like a disease.

Step confronts, addresses, and attempts to remedy all these manifestations of evil. By getting a contract with Agamemnon, another software

company, Step is able to leave the evil environment at work; and the family learns to ignore Dolores LeSueur's revelations. In the case of Stevie's teacher, Step confronts the teacher and principal, resulting in the teacher's dismissal. In reporting his confrontation with the teacher to Stevie, Step summarizes how good people are to respond to evil: "I mean, that's what you do with bad people, when you can. You just name their sin to them. That's what the prophets always did," said Step. "Just name their sins, and if they have any spark of goodness in them at all, they repent" (240).

These attempts by Step to confront evil are part of the development of the principal theme in *Lost Boys* which is, that the most effective way to combat evil is to identify and name sin. As Step tells Stevie, "[People] can only do their evil when they think that nobody knows" (240).

Step believes that people with a spark of goodness in them will repent when their sins are named. Stevie, however, asks about people who are the exception, who seem to lack any element of goodness. The narrative contains a foreshadowing of the novel's conclusion as Step, using the example of the prophet Abinadi in the Book of Mormon, shows that sometimes evil people choose to kill the messenger, rather than repent. Speaking about the possible consequences of naming sins, Step says, "Son, I guess [Abinadi] knew and the Lord knew that death isn't the worst thing in the world. The worst thing in the world is knowing that something really bad is going on and then not doing anything about it because you're afraid" (240).

Although Step and DeAnne identify, confront, and eliminate many manifestations of evil, the real evil of the novel remains unknown to them. Stevie is the only character who recognizes the evil that was foreshadowed in the prologue, evil which is of a different kind than that which Step and DeAnne overcome. Eventually—like the prophet Abinadi and even the character's possible namesake, Stephen in the New Testament—Stevie will sacrifice his life in order to identify the greatest evil in the novel. His ultimate sacrifice leads to the containment of evil, but only after that evil has taken the

lives of seven boys plus his own. Stevie is able to bring about a redemption and healing only after the evil has brought about much suffering. Though Step and DeAnne can confront and overcome one kind of evil in the novel, the absolute, uncreated evil is overcome only by Stevie's sacrifice.

With the computer used to extend his consciousness, Stevie's goodness and sensitivity lead him to an awareness of and contact with the seven boys who have been molested and murdered as a result of the evil described in the prologue. When Stevie's growing list of imaginary friends matches the names, printed in the newspaper, of the missing boys, Step and DeAnne call the detective in charge of the murder cases. After briefly meeting with Stevie, Douglas, the detective, comments to Step and DeAnne on the relationship between the good that he discerns in Stevie and the evil which has caused these boys to be lost:

"What's going on here in Steuben is so evil and he is so good and pure that he can't help but feel it. . . . The rest of us, we've got good and evil mixed up in us, and our own badness makes so much noise we can't hear the evil of the monster out there. . . . The evil that pushed those names into his mind, *that* is real." (441)

The detective recognizes within Stevie a purity which reacts to the real evil present in Steuben, a real evil that will be contained only by a sacrifice of goodness.

Card's work portrays the Mormon theological belief that evil really is real; it has an ontological status of its own; that is, evil does not merely exist in order to promote a higher good. As B. H. Roberts stated, evil "is not a created thing. It is one of the eternal existences, just as duration is and space. It is as old as law—old as Truth, old as this eternal universe" (qtd. in McMurrin 108). This evil comes from another realm, another reality, at times making itself manifest in this world.

Sterling McMurrin in the *Theological Foundations of Mormonism* explains that "the primary meaning of human existence is found in the struggle to overcome [evil]" (96). Humanity can choose to either resist God or join with him in the

endless struggle "to extend his dominion over the blind processes of the material world and to cultivate the uses of freedom for the achievement of moral ends" (97).

The members of the Fletcher family are—to quote the Apostle Paul—"laborers together with God" (1 Cor. 3:9) in the creation of the good and in the struggle against evil. They live through the severest of adversity and attempt to transmute some of the evil—whatever portion is possible—into good. For the most part, they are able to withstand the evil, but they do not stand unaffected.

Card's narrative suggests the importance of identifying and naming evil and taking action against it, even though the consequence may be death. While reading the novel, the reader brings about the narrative's disclosure of evil and, therefore, participates vicariously in the struggle against it. Contrary to the belief that narrative often advocates or gives license to evil, this particular narrative identifies, struggles against, and, after much suffering and pain, binds evil.

Card's *Lost Boys* and Young's *Salvador* are postmodern texts that explore multiple realities and the intrusion of the supernatural into this world. Postmodernism encourages the juxtaposition of realities and worlds in a way that seems propitious for Mormon literature. Postmodernism allows for the combining of diverse elements—the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, the reality of one culture and that of another—in the same text in a way that didn't seem possible in modernism. However, as in modernism, many elements of postmodernism are obviously antithetical to Mormonism. The most disturbing characteristic is what has been called the "entropy of meaning" (Hassan 55), as omnipotent narrators become impotent and as structure becomes deconstructed and fragmented.

But as these two works demonstrate, much meaning can be created out of the struggle between and the synthesis of realities and realms. Other works of Mormon literature could continue to explore the tension resulting from such a clash. The great Mormon novel might be the one that can bring these realities and realms together in

visionary combinations, allowing us—like Joseph Smith—a glimpse at worlds without end.

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Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*: Sentimentality and Separation

Laura L. Bush

For several months I had been hearing about *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by Terry Tempest Williams (New York: Vintage, 1992). Colleagues had heard her speak at the Port Townsend Writer's Conference in Washington two summers ago where a mostly non-Mormon audience gave her a standing ovation. After listening to her relate several unconventional religious practices, my LDS friends offered more cautious praise but were now interested in reading the book. I bought it myself during a Christmas shopping spree, delighted at the smooth-covered paperback's burnished appearance, resolving to savor it over vacation. Soon after this purchase, my January 1993 issue of *Outside* magazine arrived containing an extensive article on *Refuge* and cancer by David Quammen, a journalist I have come to respect for his ability to write about science with humor and lucidity. Now I *knew* I would like the book. But Neal Kramer, a friend aware of my own father's recent and unexpected death, cautioned me that *Refuge* might be painful reading. Still, by now there was no going back; I had to be "in the Mormon know."

Unfortunately, Williams's book disappointed me. Perhaps my expectations had been too high. Perhaps—I feared—I was not sophisticated enough, nor environmentally concerned enough, to appreciate all the rising and falling of the Great Salt Lake with its accompanying destruction. Yet even though Williams's and her mother's relationship proved worthwhile reading—and rather than recall fresh memories of my father's passing, it taught me compassion toward my own mother's struggle watching *her* mother's slow death in a nursing home—I also have to be honest and admit that the story did not keep me reading all night as it apparently had others such as my bird-watching colleague Don Hunter.¹ Unlike him, I could easily put the book down, especially when Williams

shifts from family saga to environmental didactics,² which, added to Williams's periodically sentimental relationship with nature, detracts from the story's effectiveness for me. In addition, her occasional but pointed jabs at Mormonism strain the carefully spun web of family and community ties that, as a feminist, Williams explicitly values and records. This strain results from what I believe is Williams's attempt to both promote and violate affiliations.

These negative reactions to Williams's text have made me feel guilty. How could I not entirely like a book about which such a large audience raved? After all, I too feel indignant at nuclear testing and the U.S. government victimizing individual American families for the state's good.³ In addition, having grown up a native of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, at the foot of the Grand Teton mountains (which Williams herself visits in the book), I cherish the outdoors and share Williams's keen interest in preserving "refuges." However, I also admit that my father was a redneck, anti-environmentalist fisherman, who taught me sympathies for interacting with the land in ways different from Williams and other "à la naturels," as my mother warmly refers to them. Besides these environmental kinships, I relate to Williams as a Mormon feminist, who like her often feels disgruntled by implicit messages about women's subordinate position in the Church and the general membership's limited opportunities to question its patriarchy—a tertiary, although obvious agenda in Williams's text which few reviewers fail to mention.⁴ Thus, my dissatisfaction with *Refuge* results not so much from her desire to respect and protect vital ecosystems, to critique Mormonism, or even to celebrate women's relationships and their natural affinity for Mother Earth. Rather, my dissatisfaction results partly from Williams's occasional sentimentality and largely from her portrayal of Mormons, especially Mormon women, who gener-

ally come off as passive, frequently mindless victims—a portrayal that fulfills the public's stereotyped notions about them and contrasts markedly with the often feisty, energetic women I find in my ward.

Before I argue these exceptions to *Refuge's* success, however, I would like briefly to summarize several early book reviews, since my original hesitations about whole-hearted praise led me to read what other critics thought. Of the nine reviews I found, only one reviewer ventured to criticize Williams's book in any forceful way. Margaret B. Guthrie of the *New York Times* felt that Williams "deserves the highest marks for her description of her mother's death." However, said Guthrie, "her questioning of her Mormon faith is not smoothly interwoven with the other two themes of *Refuge*, and interrupts the narrative flow. Most disruptive of all," continues Guthrie, "is the discussion of the atmospheric nuclear weapons testing in Nevada" which "come[s] without any foreshadowing . . . mak[ing] for a contrived ending" (18). A critic in *The Women's Review of Books* addressed Williams's "bimodal narrative" that "sometimes seems forced and interruptive." However, the reviewer pulls back from complete censure by asserting that "the points of contact between the two chronicles of loss reflect something essential about Williams's own habits of mind" (10). Similarly, Charles E. Little's review in *Wilderness* contended that "because of its numerous topics and themes," a typical editor at a New York publishing house might say that this book lacks focus—or at least that it essays too much. And that would be true. But the editor for this book was not so typical, wrote Little, since this editor "find[s] . . . something deeper that could make the literary flaws of this very human, very moving volume seem almost trivial" (34).

After reading these reviews, I sensed a reluctance on anyone's part to take issue with much more than the fragmented scope of Williams's book. As my friend Karin Anderson England has observed, maybe we *all* feel guilty for criticizing experiences portrayed so personally that negative scrutiny might appear to be an attack on Williams herself. The one final guarded criticism I uncov-

ered from Cannon's review added: "Only a few things mar the book's near perfection, and," says Cannon—notice this guilt—"I feel crotchety and schoolmarmish and out of linguistic fashion to mention them." But she kindly assured us, "I do so because I think Williams deserves more careful editing." Cannon then details significant misspellings and other grammatical errors published in the final text, claiming that such "little things do matter," because for this reviewer, they are "like pimples on a beautiful face" (175).

A few cautious evaluations like these comforted me, but most reviewers raved: from the *Washington Post*, "a heroic book" (Lichtenstein 6), from *Publishers Weekly*, "a moving account of personal loss and renewal" (73); from *Kirkus Reviews*, "Williams's evocations of the austere beauty of the Utah desert, the Great Salt Lake, and their wildlife . . . offer great rewards" (1078); and finally from the Association for Mormon Letters's own *Newsletter*, "Terry Tempest Williams knocked me down" (Eddy). Obviously such widespread attention and praise attest to the book's merit, which I grant. Nevertheless, I still disagree with reviewers like Cannon, who asserts that *Refuge* displays "No tricks. No sentimentalizing. No histrionics" (171), or Little, who claims the book exhibits "impressive honesty, an absence of the pretense one often finds in 'nature' writing" (34). Too many affected passages prove otherwise.

In autobiography, sentimentality may result when a writer indulges in excesses of emotion or appears pretentious. A rhetorical strategy writers employ for avoiding such affectation is merely to present life, allowing readers to draw conclusions free from effusive, abstract narrative commentary. Show more; tell less, even in extended personal essays like *Refuge*. As an autobiographer, Williams successfully avoids sentimentalizing her experiences surrounding the Great Salt Lake when she maintains objectivity *without* compromising her emotional connection to nature earned through long, thoughtful hours of observation on the bird refuge. For instance, when Williams ritually washes the dead swan and then later prepares her own mother's lifeless body for burial, readers are moved. The two portrayals communicate profound sincerity.

ty. Williams describes "smoothing feathers," "lift[ing] both wings," "untangling the long neck," and "wash[ing] the swan's black bill and feet until they shone like patent leather" (121). Similarly, Williams artfully teaches us about nature in an early passage, where she describes the Great Salt Lake as like a dinner plate rather than a cup (6), or a later passage when she relates the fascinating story of hunter-gatherers' grasshopper cuisine at Lakeside Cave through her dialogue with archeologist David Madsen (181-83). In these three cases—the swan, the lake, and the grasshoppers—our understanding and enjoyment of nature are deepened.

However, as soon as Williams adopts a "New Age" voice, she slips from sincerity to gushing theatrics that excessively romanticize her relationship to nature, putting her in danger of committing John Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy." According to Ruskin, writers commit this flaw when the "ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things"—especially "external things" in nature—are marred by "'extraordinary' or false appearances . . . under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy" (Rosenberg 64). An example of the pathetic fallacy from *Refuge* occurs when Williams declares, "All of life drums and beats, at once, sustaining a rhythm audible only to the spirit. I can drum my heartbeat back into the Earth, beating, hearts beating, my hands on the Earth—like a ruffled grouse on a log, beating, hearts beating—like a bittern in the marsh, beating, hearts beating. My hands on the Earth beating, hearts beating. I drum back my return" (85). For me, such purple patches conjure up images of hanging wooden beads and exotic tapered incense sold at environmentally correct music stores by graybearded men. Williams's story most frequently threatens such pretense when she affects extraordinary affiliation with birds or other animals and when she indulges in mere listing that feels forced or clichéd rather than meaningful presentation of her Utah experience. Consider Williams's description of the sand dunes: "they are female," she muses.

Sensuous curves—the small of a woman's back. Breasts. Buttocks. Hips and pelvis. They are the natural shapes of Earth. Let me

lie naked and disappear. Crypsis.

The wind rolls over me. Particles of sand skitter across my skin, fill my ears and nose. I am aware only of breathing. The workings of my lungs are amplified. The wind picks up. I hold my breath. It massages me. A raven lands inches away. I exhale. The raven flies. (109)

Some may view Williams's phrasing in this passage as poetic, but I am more inclined to view her erotic relationship with earth and wind—wanting to "lie naked and disappear," the wind "massaging" her inhaling and exhaling body—as self-indulgent. Such detracting passages occur in *Refuge* only when Williams stops educating and starts emoting. Another brief example: "I shall curl up in the grasses like a bedded animal and dream. Marsh music. Red-wing blackbirds. Yellow-headed blackbirds. Song sparrows. Barn swallows snapping mosquitoes on the wing. Herons traversing the sky" (150). Most outdoor enthusiasts could document their forays into the wilderness with similarly little style, but numerous other passages prove Williams is capable of better, and I for one am glad they exist.

My second criticism of the book is more important and probably more controversial. It is also where, as a Mormon feminist who wants badly to be fully supportive of Williams's feminist causes, I find myself conflicted.

Terry Tempest Williams's "unnatural history of family and place" is obviously a woman's text. In fact, *Refuge's* most appealing aspect is the pulse of its woman-centered heart. Williams repeatedly addresses feminist concerns for respecting Mother Earth; she emphasizes the collaborative efforts and bonds among family, friends, colleagues, and community to produce this story; and she apparently feels equally bonded to place—namely, the bird refuge and Utah, home of Mormonism. This connection to LDS people becomes problematic, however, because Williams's oversights and generalizations about her religious community, especially in regards to women, threaten to break the cords she so lovingly depicts. Several instances demonstrate that Williams values her affiliation with LDS women, but she also purposely ensures that readers

know she is not very much like the majority of them. For instance, during her mother's illness, the Tempest family benefits from Mormon women's domestic output: homemade custard from a neighbor and later dinner from the Relief Society (163). For this care Williams expresses gratitude, but she has also already mocked the 1960s Mormon women who produced glass grapes, "a symbol of craft adeptness," which, claims Williams, is "an important tenet of Mormonism" (48).

Although I do not want to appear humorless or self-satisfied since I too have indulged in humor at Mormon women's expense, I must point out that no matter how many Relief Society members actually enjoy making crafts, few, if any, are shallow enough to view craft production as "important tenets" of their faith. Moreover, enough women have complained about such activities at home-making meetings to alter the program; thus, rather than focusing their energies on cranking out kitsch, Mormon women generally mean to teach each other gospel doctrines, provide service for their wards and communities, and develop supportive friendships. Yet Williams conveniently leaves this information out, evidently preferring to generalize Relief Society members—at least in this instance—as superficial women with poor aesthetic taste. Although there may be some truth to Williams's characterization, it nevertheless slights the very women with whom Williams claims such close ties, presenting them in a narrow, pejorative profile. Thus, in this case and several others I will cite, rather than guiding Mormon women to greater spirituality, Williams alienates a significant portion of them. Ultimately, straining connections to her community and readership seems undesirable—not to mention alien—to the feminist ideals Williams's text espouses, especially when set in the context of women's autobiographical tradition where the exploration and celebration of affiliations usually reveal the female autobiographer's identity.

Mary G. Mason examines four prototypical female autobiographies—Dame Julian of Norwich's *Revelations or Showings*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation*, and Anne Bradstreet's "To My Dear Children"—concluding that "the self discovery of female identity

seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness" and that the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some "other" (qtd. in Olney 210). Obviously, Williams's main "other" is her dying mother, but she depicts relationships with "other" women too. Mason explains that women's "recognition of another consciousness . . . this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other seems . . . to enable women to write openly about themselves" (210). Certainly the conversations Williams recreates among her mother, her grandmother Mimi, and friends—even publishing letters between them as part of her text—demonstrates this phenomenon of revealing oneself through connections. And "because women tend 'toward involvement' with others 'as opposed to separation,'" says Ann Walters, "they are accordingly 'more likely to explore the self in relation to others' in their autobiographical acts" (qtd. in Eakin 226). Finally, Carol Holly's discussion of "Nineteenth-Century Autobiographies of Affiliation" builds on Estelle Jelinek's work in *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography* by demonstrating that nineteenth-century female autobiographies like Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Recollections* and Lucy Larcom's *A New England Girlhood* demonstrate how identity for these women was available through "affiliation" rather than "achievement" (qtd. in Eakin 219).

Like other women autobiographers, Williams follows the female practice of revealing her own life in relation to family and community. In fact, Williams's celebration of relationships seems boundless. She hazards including those sometimes sentimental but also endearing letters among women because, she says, "Once opened, a connection is made. We are not alone in the world" (84); she thanks her extended family for their "web of concern" (292); she explains how her Mormon family, committed to genealogy, has "a sense of history. And our history is tied to the land" (14). Likewise, she describes how her friend John Lilly "suggests [that] whales are a culture maintained by oral traditions. Stories. The experience of an individual whale is valuable to the survival of its community" (175). Toward her own story's end,

she notices the spiders' webs as they "re-inhabit" the resurrecting bird refuge, describing the spiders' "gossamer threads . . . binding it all together" (274). And with her mother's and grandmother's passing, Williams discovers that even though dead, "Mother and Mimi are present. The relationships continue—something I did not anticipate" (275). Finally, even though Williams questions her Mormon faith throughout the text, she learns through maturity that "faith is the centerpiece of a connected life. It allows us to live by the grace of invisible strands" (198).

As a twentieth-century autobiographer, Williams has improved upon nineteenth-century accounts of women's lives by revealing her identity through relationships *and* achievement as a professional naturalist and author. However, all this effort to promote relationships seems diminished when Williams's "history" overlooks important aspects of Mormon women's experience or characterizes them in unattractive ways. This, in turn, threatens to generate rancor rather than love between Williams and Latter-day Saints so that *Refuge* ultimately becomes an autobiography more about separation than connection.

Besides ridiculing Mormon women's "craft adeptness," Williams recreates her conversation with Mimi and Diane about Mormon women and authority. Although readers might respond to it as refreshingly honest, Mormon women may feel demeaned by Terry's slightly naughty retelling of the pedestal joke: "How does a man honor a woman? . . . He puts her on a pedestal and then asks her to get down on it" (117). Of course the joke is meant to make Mormons examine their unhealthy aggrandizement of women. But it also purposely assaults Christian sensibilities; and even though Terry would probably tell readers like me to "loosen up" as she did her mother, the lewd nature of the joke abuses Mormon women. Although she is freer to tell such jokes in truly private settings, for orchestrated public expression of intimate conversation like those in this book I believe Williams is capable of finding a better way to subvert Mormons' admittedly exasperating desire to keep women on pedestals. In addition, I would speculate that regardless of his motives a

contemporary *male* autobiographer could not publicly recount such a joke with impunity. Therefore, a feminist like Williams, who should know better, ought not to escape censure either.

During the same three women's conversation, Latter-day Saint women are also stereotyped as complacent with no mention of the significant church leadership they render daily. Despite their lack of ordained power through priesthood authority—which can and has been used against them—Mormon women are not without influence. Still, Mimi asks, "Why is it . . . that we are so willing to give up our own authority?" The question is an important one for which Terry offers a pat answer: "It's easier. . . . We don't have to think. The responsibility belongs to someone else" (116-17). I agree, with equal dismay, that many Mormon women too readily proclaim relief at not being held accountable as priesthood holders. And for this complacency they deserve criticism. However, who can blame Latter-day Saint women for avoiding additional obligation in this church? The Relief Society members I know already accept tremendous responsibility for their ward's success, and neither these efforts nor their thinking seem that "easy" to me. Thus, along with the warranted criticism presented in Diane's, Mimi's, and Terry's conversation, Williams might at least have validated Mormon women's leadership, too.

As their dialogue continues, Terry asks, "Why are we so afraid of being selfish? And why do we distract and excuse ourselves from our own creativity?" Diane says it is because "we haven't figured out that time for ourselves is ultimately time for our families. You can't be constantly giving without depleting the source. Somehow, somewhere, we must replenish ourselves" (117). This, of course, is current feminist philosophy with which I would not disagree. Yet I believe that when Mimi describes the ideas as "antithetical to the culture we belong to, where women are . . . taught to sacrifice, support, and endure," she also ignores the changes occurring churchwide in support of women's personal needs. Ignoring these changes discredits Mormon women's present advances. After all, Mimi, Diane, and Terry have achieved a great deal as modern Latter-day Saints living in

Utah; rather than portraying themselves mostly as victims, they might take an offensive rather than defensive approach to the problem, cataloging and promoting the "other virtues" which strong Mormon women like themselves are "more interested in cultivating" (117). This does not mean that I believe Mormon women have nothing to complain about or that they have achieved total equity in the Church. They have not. And in *some* ways their history since the Church's beginnings has been a loss of power. But Williams again paints only half of our Mormon picture, and the bad half at that. Although we still have a long way to go, I am convinced by my own experience as an educated LDS woman that I need more people like the Tempest-Williams family to speak in *constructive* ways about the growth we have achieved or about the benefits gained when individual women care for themselves. If women like Diane, Mimi, and Terry *only* bemoan their lots, then their complaints mainly serve to break meaningful connections with their community, allowing Mormon women to dismiss the important lessons they have to teach as mere feminist selfishness.

Another significant opportunity Williams misses for empowering Mormon women occurs in the ambiguous manner she describes blessing her mother. 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Moroni 10:8-9, and Doctrine and Covenants 46:10-25 all teach Mormons—men *and* women—to seek such spiritual gifts as discerning spirits, speaking in tongues, and healing the sick.⁵ Though not everyone has been given all the gifts, this intimate moment between a mother and her daughter appears to be an opportunity for Terry to legitimately exercise faith in the gift of healing by blessing her mother just as early Church women often did.⁶ Showing Mormon women the desirability of seeking such gifts might have invited them to follow her example. Instead, Williams prefaces the scene by mentioning that only Latter-day Saint males can hold the priesthood and give "formal blessings." She then characterizes her female prayer in clandestine terms, implying the act is slightly sinful when it is not necessarily so.⁷ "In Mormon religion," Williams explains, "formal blessings of healing are given by men through the Priesthood of God.

Women have no outward authority. But within the secrecy of sisterhood we have always bestowed benisons upon our families" (158). Such dubious-looking portrayals can only serve to continue Mormon women's spiritual subjugation because orthodox members will read the passage as mere rebellion and dismiss Williams's sincere, significant faith in seeking gifts of the spirit through appropriate means. Perhaps Williams herself does not recognize the power given by God and available through her faith since ironically, unlike an Eliza Snow or a Patty Sessions—early Victorian Saints—we "modern" Relief Society members have few peers seeking for and sharing spiritual gifts. Describing these women's frequent experiences with healing the sick or speaking and interpreting tongues, Mormon historian Maureen Ursenbach Beecher writes that "the addition of the spiritual dimension [among early Latter-day Saint women] served but to strengthen the[ir] ties . . . and enhance their faith. Mormon women found spiritual expression which bonded them to each other, to their cause, and to their eternal Parents" (97).

Besides missing an opportunity to lead modern Mormon women to renewed spiritual empowerment, Williams rejects the ultimate Mormon woman's experience: childbirth and motherhood. To the majority of Mormon women, giving birth is supremely validating and a model for their own potential as infinitely creating mother-goddesses. But Williams presently declines child-rearing. Early in the story her mother admits, "Having a child completed something for me. I can't explain it. It's something you feel as a woman connected to other women" (51). By consciously choosing not to have children, Williams again appears to refuse connection with Mormon women. She does not want to be them. Although Williams's mother tries to accept Terry's decision, she subsequently implies she would like grandchildren by Terry and Brooke, asking, "What would you tell your children of me?" (61) Then nearing her death, Diane reveals, "I would hate to see you miss out on the most beautiful experience life has to offer. What are you afraid of?" Williams claims she is afraid of "losing [her] solitude," insisting, "My ideas, Mother, are my children" (220-21). This may imply that

Williams mistakenly believes a woman cannot have both ideas *and* children. Furthermore, she must be afraid of more—whether consciously or unconsciously—since she portrays her mother's growing tumor as being like a pregnancy, a problematic analogy at best. She describes the tumor as "foreign, something outside ourselves. It is, however, our own creation. The creation we fear" (44). And her earlier request to touch this creation calls up images of a child feeling for her brother or sister's kick inside a mother's womb: "After everyone left, I asked Mother if I could feel the tumor. She lay down on the carpet in the family room and placed my hand on her abdomen. With her help I found the strange rise on the left side and palpated my fingers around its perimeter" (35).

Besides these apparently unconscious anxieties about giving birth to a tumor like her mother's, Williams also fears breast cancer—another mutilation of women's life-giving powers. Given her family's unfortunate experience, Williams's fears are understandable. Furthermore, these personal concerns extend beyond human beings' afflictions to consideration for Mother Earth. Williams describes the nuclear-bombed Utah ground as developing "stretch marks" and giving birth to "stillborn" bombs (288). In order to deal with fears about the earth's scarred landscape and her own potentially diseased body, Williams simply refuses to give birth, choosing instead a "pen and a piece of paper" as "weapons" that she wields against the government and perhaps even unconsciously against Mormon women, who take the risk of producing children in the face of life's grave dangers.

Williams's most explicit criticism of Mormonism comes toward the end: "For many years," she declares, "I have . . . listened, observed, and quietly formed my own opinions, in a culture that rarely asks questions because it has all the answers." Continuing, her resentment builds, culminating in a firm indictment of both the government and Mormons for their blind obedience:

One by one, I have watched the women in my family die common, heroic deaths. We sat in waiting rooms hoping for good news, but always receiving the bad. I cared for them,

bathed their scarred bodies, and kept their secrets. . . . In the end, I witnessed their last peaceful breaths, becoming a midwife to the rebirth of their souls.

The price of obedience has become too high.

The fear and inability to question authority that ultimately killed rural communities in Utah during atmospheric testing of atomic weapons is the same fear I saw in my mother's body. Sheep. Dead sheep. The evidence is buried. (286)

Williams's curious choice to define herself as a midwife for dying women's souls could be viewed as self-aggrandizing, since she will not hazard giving birth herself, making the characterization suspicious to life-giving Mormon women. It could be painfully appropriate, however, since one who refuses to give life might be the best midwife to a dead flock.

While reading her book, Williams's audience is meant to understand that *Refuge* is an accurate and truthful history about her Utah experience. She meticulously records the Great Salt Lake's water level and important dates like births or deaths; she adopts a personable, poetic style when explaining environmental phenomenon, suggesting a desire to accurately educate a popular audience; and she provides an extensive acknowledgment section to conclude the book which credits numerous friends, family, and experts for their invaluable advice and information, helping her "tell the right story" (297). One reference to Leonard Arrington's work in Mormon history thanks him for instructing her "about my people" and adds that she is "grateful for his integrity in telling our history straight. He is trustworthy," asserts Williams (295). I believe we are meant to assume Williams is trustworthy, too.

Issues of truth arise often in autobiographical studies. Describing "Modern American Autobiography," Albert E. Stone points out that "autobiographies need and court readers, especially sympathetic ones who will generously confirm the identity of the self who writes and the self who lived." Stone adds, however, that "most autobiographers also expect skeptical readers. Indeed, their own histori-

cal consciousness activated by writing, and their propensity to confess as well as commit deceptions and errors, draw attention to the different kinds of truth aimed at and/or achieved." Williams's sometimes sympathetic but frequently critical depiction of Mormonism indicates that she would acquire readers who relate to and/or resist her "unnatural history of family and place" as a Mormon in Utah. Stone cautions: "To read and exploit autobiographies as history, then, not only requires critical attention to the text, to what is said and not said, but involves going beyond the text in order to grasp a sometimes elusive set of aims and putatively 'truthful' assertions" (qtd. in Eakin 98). Stone also warns that one "perennial problem" critics face when interpreting autobiography "is the overdetermined nature of all assertions in autobiographical texts and the problem of the 'truth' value to others as compared to the author" (100). In other words, autobiographers' claims may inherently suffer from their too decided nature so that while these assertions seem true to the autobiographer herself, they may not necessarily be true—at least in the same way—to her readers. Williams's text certainly exhibits numerous "overdetermined" assertions that, from her tone, she adamantly believes are "true." But, according to Stone's observation about the interpretive problem in autobiography, what may be unquestionably true for Williams about Mormonism may be quite questionable to her skeptical Mormon audience.

Like issues of truth in autobiographical studies, truth issues permeate Mormonism. An orthodox Mormon understands herself to be a member of the only "true" church and regularly rises in fast and testimony meeting to bear witness that Joseph Smith was a "true" prophet or that the present day leader is also a "true" prophet. Even though a non-Mormon reading public might not be aware of Mormons' preoccupation with truth, Williams herself certainly must. This means she had to expect, and even court, resistance from some Latter-day Saint readers who would feel unsettled about the entire "truth" of Mormonism presented here. Furthermore, when Williams purposefully criticizes Mormons without also offering a fully drawn, more charitable portrait,

and when she separates herself from Mormon women in particular, she betrays one of her text's own major themes: the sacredness of a connected life. Ironically, no matter how much Williams may foster estrangement (an intriguing oxymoron), this Latter-day Saint will always be bound to her Utah culture. And I suspect that good Mormons, especially good Mormon women, will continue nurturing that bond.

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Notes

1. Helen Cannon, in her review for *Dialogue*, says her friends "swear it's an 'all nighter,' impossible to leave" (172).
2. For example, Williams, through a Kenyan woman's dialogue, reiterates the cliché that "we have forgotten our kinship with the land" (137); even more overtly she decries the destruction of wetlands: "Conservation laws are only as strong as the people who support them. We look away and they are in danger of being overturned, compromised, and weakened" (265).
3. Williams's story reminds me of Yoshiko Uchida's 1982 autobiography, *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1982), which describes the U.S. government's unwarranted internment of Japanese Americans during World War II in ten different sites like the Sevier Desert camp—euphemistically known then as the Central Utah Relocation Center—located near Delta, Utah, where Uchida and her family spent time.
4. Six of the nine reviews I read noted Williams's religious defiance in one form or another.
5. During the dedication of the Nauvoo Monument to Women on 29 June 1987 Apostle Bruce R. McConkie remarked that "where spiritual things are concerned, as pertaining to all of the gifts of the Spirit, with reference to the receipt of revelation, the gaining of testimonies, and the seeing of visions, in all matters that pertain to godliness and holiness and which are brought to pass as a result of personal righteousness—in all these things men and women stand in a position of absolute equality before the Lord. He is no respecter of persons nor of sexes, and he blesses those men and those women who seek him and serve him and keep his commandments" (61).
6. For example, Eliza R. Snow recorded in her diary: "I spoke to her br. H[unter] in the gift of tongues, sis. S[essions] interpreted, after which br. H[unter], sis. S[essions] & I laid hands on sis. H[unter]'s head and rebuk'd her illness & blessed her" (325). Midwife Patty Sessions wrote: "Visited Sary Ann and sister Whitney. Sylvia had a chill at sister Buels as we visited her in the forenoon. We prayed and laid hands on her. She was better" (Godfrey, Godfrey, and Derr 193). And from Ruth May Fox's diary: "Sister Sarah Phelps spoke in tounges [tongues] with great power insomuch that the floor and the chairs and our limbs trembled. She blessed Sister Whitney who was an invalid for years. . . . The sisters laid hands on Sister W. and prayed for her speedy recovery Sister N[ettie] C Taylor being mouth" (ibid. 377).
7. Since presenting this paper, I have reconsidered my criticism of Terry Tempest Williams's view that modern LDS women are free to exercise faith in seeking the gift of healing. In other words, I now agree with Williams's implication in this passage that contemporary Mormon women are explicitly discouraged from and cautioned against laying on hands for the gift of healing, even if it is done as an act of faith in Christ rather than through any presumed priesthood authority. However, I still believe in any spiritual gift's desirability and wish that Williams's autobiography had confronted the issue more directly rather than through innuendo, although I can sympathize with her dilemma. Rather than using the phrase "secrecy of sisterhood," she might more factly have inspired and instructed worthy Mormon women to seek openly the *scripturally sanctioned* gift of healing through faith in Jesus Christ at selective times such as this

one between a daughter and her dying mother. Current implicit or explicit discouragement by the Church of women's right to exercise faith in seeking to heal by the spirit is dismaying, considering early Mormon women's freedom and encouragement to do so. Linda King Newell's careful history of LDS women's experience with spiritual gifts is an invaluable study on the issue (Newell 111-50). After reading Newell, I would concede that this particular LDS women's issue is far more historically complex and important than either I in my criticism or Tempest Williams in her autobiography have given it credit for. Furthermore, in the context of Williams's ironic choice to bless her mother's cancerous abdomen/womb, Newell's essay is particularly useful since she documents the early popularity but later official discontinuance of Mormon women's longest-held tradition of blessing each other before childbirth even as late as the mid-twentieth century. (See esp. 130-32, 138-39.)

Creating Zion: Why Write in the Household of Faith

MaryJan Gay Munger

*And yet why are we here on earth at all?
To produce great works of art or to have joy?*

Is there such a choice? Is the flip side to the nightmare of the "driven, anguished soul" who creates great art (Newbold 228) a dream within a dream of the domestic man or "woman, simple and fruitful, a woman with many children, a great husband . . . and no talent" (Sarton 219)? If I stop "stealing" time away from them for writing, am I guaranteed that my children won't turn out rebellious, ungrateful, or unloving? With this one easy step, do I avoid the neuroses and tragedies that dog the footsteps of the great? Or if I choose to suffer for art's sake, sacrificing everything and everyone else on the altar, could I please have it in writing that the "final hash" will be art? Phrased this way, the dichotomy is ridiculously false. I say "Hear, hear" to the voice that claims there are no "safe choices." The peace and safety of a domestic life are as powerful an illusion as any other (Bickmore 287).

Yet I have heard the other voices, too: "Both the Mormon male and female are raised on the ethic of service . . . , [an ethic which] makes it hard to believe in my work. Everything else is more important" (Barber qtd. in Nichols 284). And we all know that "no other success can compensate for failure in the home."

On the other hand, the demands of motherhood are "almost certain death to creation" (Olsen 18-19). I have heard that "there are enough women to do the childbearing and childrearing. I know of none who can write my books" (H. H. Richardson qtd. in Olsen 19) and that "my ideas, Mother, are my children" (Williams 220). And that I need to "admit it, a woman is meant to create children not works of art—that's what she has been engaged to do, so to speak. A man with talent does what is expected of him, makes his way. . . . It's the

natural order of things. . . . The woman who does so is aberrant" (Sarton 190). Have you heard that "Muses are never husbands, and rarely wives"? (Heilbrun xvii)

Of course not only women feel themselves caught between life and art: "A man not only . . . can" give full energy to his profession "but is (nearly always) expected to. But if he wants to practice an art *and* support a family, he has a problem" (Jorgensen 294). For "he that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprises. . . . Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless man" (Bacon 1674). In the end we see that we must "refuse to the woman [or man] with a spare hour stolen from the kitchen or nursery the deluding daydream of being an artist. [For it is] a silly dream" (Heilbrun xv-xvi).

None of these are the voices of our enemies, but of people making their own torn choices. For myself, I have already privately answered back. No doubt you could respond more quickly and wittily than I. But the point-by-point rebuttals and clarifications finally get us nowhere. As Bruce Jorgensen has said, this is a dilemma we can't solve.

So let's pull back a moment. Let's take a long look at this vision of Life and Art, this vision that imagines the Artist as a brooding, tortured soul gazing with ineffable and solitary courage at the Void, the Inferno, the Uncreated Deep, while peopling Life with the obtuse bourgeoisie, overweight bill-collectors, and here and there a "silent, watchful, tireless affection" who places food before one and sees that one bathes (Conrad qtd. in Olsen 12): mommies and daddies and teachers and nine-to-fivers; fixers and providers and cleaner-uppers. It is this vision which so clouded the eyes of A. Alvarez that he could not recognize Ted

Hughes's cheery young wife as the author of a powerful, disturbing poem he had himself published the year before (she was, after all, dressing the baby for a stroll in the park when they first met): "For a moment I went completely blank; I didn't know what she was talking about. She noticed and helped me out. 'The one you put in *The Observer* a year ago. About the factory at night.' 'For Christ's sake, Sylvia Plath. . . . I'm sorry. It was a lovely poem.'" *Lovely* wasn't the right word, he later admitted, "but what else do you say to a bright young housewife?" (qtd. in Olsen 241)

This Romantic (with a capital *R*) vision of the Artist, heroically scaling the heights of Parnassus, is a very compelling fiction, but it is not an especially useful one for most Mormon writers. I am not saying that periods of isolation aren't necessary for the act of writing nor that a quiet, protected room of one's own is not required at times. I would be a hypocrite to suggest it. Even in writing this paper, I finally needed a day of perfect (almost perfect) solitude. And I'm repeatedly grateful for a husband who takes time off work so I wouldn't face humiliation before you today. We must all receive the ministrations of others from time to time in order to do anything larger than ourselves. The more I look at the lives of actual artists, writers, composers, the more I believe that great works are never the product of one person's effort. I believe a coming together of separate abilities must be simply a requirement for creation on any level.

However I have been fed by the vision of art and life that I beheld first in the voice of Ishmael in Melville's *Moby Dick*. It's not Ahab, the isolated monomaniac, who tells us the story after all, but Ishmael—Ishmael who suggests that a temporary "act of physical isolation" a symbolic "spiritual withdrawal *for the time*, from all outward worldly ties and connexions," is necessary for the artist who yet must return to be "replenished with the meat and wine of the world" (Melville 133, emphasis mine). And it is Ishmael who moves back and forth between solitude and communion with others, Ishmael who is the solitary wanderer able to see and embrace a brother in the completely

"other" Queequeg. It is Ishmael's rich, embracing voice that survives to tell us what happened, his voice that exclaims: "Man must eventually lower, or at least *shift*, his conceit of *attainable* felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" (527, emphasis mine). Of course this is another compelling vision which is to some degree fraudulent, at best incomplete. But no more so than the monomaniac vision of Art in the place of Life, and much more useful to me.

Rather than some monolithic decision once and for all between Life or Art—which decision hardly any real artist of any kind seems ever actually and lastingly to have made and which would not be possible for me, nor for many Mormon writers I believe—the voice of Ishmael offers a continual movement between the two positions, at any one moment in time out of balance: an artistic life that "functions in bursts" (Bickmore 287). But the tilted balance is what provides the forward motion: through time and the myriad of daily minute adjustments, we may achieve or rather receive, not balance, but something like it.¹ Something which is, I believe, an infusion of grace, a necessary gift from our God. In any case, I often wonder if the reliance of so many writers on drugs and other addictions can't be partly explained as an attempt to re-create the natural rhythms of on- and off-time which a person living while writing naturally moves through again and again. Perhaps there is as much truth as beauty to Rilke's suggestion that

life has unending possibilities of renewal. . . . that the using of strength in a certain sense is always increase of strength also; for fundamentally we have to do only with a wide cycle: all strength that we give away comes over us again, experienced and altered. Thus it is in prayer. . . . There are here, amid this realm of fields, spots of dark ploughed land. They are empty, and yet lie they here as though the bright culms round about them were there for their sakes, rows of fencing for their protection. I asked what was doing with these dark acres. They told me: *c'est de la terre en repos*. So lovely, you see, can rest be, and so it looks

alongside work. Not disquieting, but so that one gathers a deep confidence and the feel of a big time. (119)

This paper was begun as a response to the panel on "Domesticity and the Call to Art" presented before this body in 1993. Am I the only one who hears as one of the most conscious and most universal anxieties for Mormon artists this tension between family responsibilities, active communion with the Saints, service to others—in a word, domesticity—and a personal desire to express one's self through art? Not that it is an uneasiness I don't hear in the artistic world at large. We hear that Art demands a "high selfishness." Communion with others requires selflessness. Therefore the two are incompatible. Therefore we must choose the one or the other. "Would any one of us want to trade places with Van Gogh? And who of us who has pursued both a family and writing doesn't recognize that while the writing is deeply essential, no book or article will hold a place in our hearts equal to that eternal love and regard we have for our spouses and children?" (Newbold 286).

I hear a basic fallacy in this thinking. If I believe that "the writing" is itself essential to me, I may as easily say that while of course I love my family, no one expression of that love, no batch of laundry, no family dinner can hold the place in *my* heart equal to that eternal joy which I yearn towards while writing and which I believe I will continue regardless of death. To the irreconcilable choice between life and art, the only real response is "And still I write. Still I take care of others." It's beneficial to hear that "I continue to give that dream [of a balance between the two] my best shot" (ibid.) or that "the development of my talent [is] a heritage for my kids, especially my daughters" (Young 291). It is even more beneficial to hear Lisa Orme Bickmore explain, "Rather than thinking of domesticity as a trap and art as rebellion, it helps for me to think of art, of writing, as a way out of the tight little box that those oppositions create" (287). But more than any literal quotation, the most rhetorically powerful response is in the way she ends her part of the panel: by giving us her own poems, one after the other.

I believe it is in that refusal to make the offered choice between Art or Life that we may dissolve what is at last an artificial dilemma. Before I continue, listen please to what I am *not* saying. I'm not saying that we won't have to make choices between "Do I answer the phone? Do I stop and play with the baby? Do I go visit my neighbor? Do I prepare my lesson and grade these papers? Do I muck out this kitchen? Do I have that talk with my husband now?" and "Do I sit down and write?" Of course we have to choose each hour of our lives, but it is never an everlasting choice and the right choice, will not always be the one or the other. For as much as we may gripe that Shakespeare never had to create in such squalor and confusion, and as much as we may fritter away our dearly won writing time imagining a solitary cabin in the pines, these decisions are finally a matter of logistics. Wait. I am also not saying that all we have to do is try our very best and have faith and everything will work out fine. Nor am I saying that it will be easy or even that it will always be worth it. Who hasn't known the frustration of putting everyone that depends upon you out so that you can write a whole morning's worth of garbage? I don't even know if what I'm saying is completely true, that it isn't to some extent misleading or at best simple-minded.

But it seems to me that the big problem is not that our time is limited and the demands upon us are not. The problem is doubt: doubt that attempting to write is really a justifiable way (in the eyes of God and our in-laws) to spend our lives, doubt that great art is ever possible to anyone who doesn't give up everything else, doubt even that we have enough talent to make the sacrifice worthwhile, doubt that the cost is not too great to try to do both. Wouldn't it be wonderful if someone universally proclaimed a Great Writer could now rise and say, "Hey, Life *and* Art worked for me; it could work for you"? Because I would guess that as Latter-day Saints, if not as awake human beings, most of us find repugnant the idea that we sacrifice others to our own ambition.

So I offer a question and a testimony. First the question: Where did we get the idea that art was something we did *against or instead of* life? Seeing

this writing I do as something I do *for* my family and *for* my people, something I do *for*, in praise of God, not only gives me "permission" to write in the face of other, also important, demands. It also shows me a way to understand what I am trying to do as a writer. I am not trying to "express myself." I am not trying to "gain a reputation" for my talent. I am not trying to scratch my creative itch—as Anne Morrow Lindbergh has revealed, if that's your goal, baking biscuits works as well (117). And when I think this way, I can hear the words I once read from a Zulu singer with Lady-smith Black Mombazo:

We believe that music is something to make people know each other. Once you have a chance to stand and dance, the people are going to know who you are, where you're from, who's your father, who's your mother. You're not just dancing for yourself. When I sing, I know that I am standing for my people, for my family. Now I must try to do a good thing, so my people will be known. . . . Music is the life of the people. . . . Nobody composed it. It just came spiritually, because Zulus are spiritual. That's their way, their life. When you sing, you must *feel* the music and dedicate yourself to your dancing and singing. The music just takes over. The music makes you like you can fly. (Shabalala 105-07)

This is a vision of art as a communal and spiritual action—a vision more useful for us because it acknowledges truths we cannot find in the moribund romance of the Individual Ego who must exist at the sacrifice of every "other" thing.

It is a vision demanding humility though no less dedication than the other—Art that creates Zion, not just on its pages but in its very making. And here I must make room for yet another voice:

The role of Mormon literature and criticism will not be to establish what our culture currently conceives of as Zion (which I fear is considered too apocalyptically distant and too narrowly as something like a cross between the United Order and the Emerald City); rather, Mormon criticism and literature will help to discover and define Zion—to *achieve* this aspiration, not just reflect it. (Burton 229)

If we imagine Art only as the pinnacle of the pyramid, built on the backs of slaves incapable of understanding the grand design, then either we do not believe in the promise of the kingdom of God, or we do not believe art will have a place in the Millennium.

You may think you have already heard the promised testimony portion. And really, how can I ever separate what I believe from anything I say? I have mentioned the harmony through time of unbalanced movements which I believe is possible for Mormon writers, movements unbalanced because more than just two or three things are repeatedly and at random demanded of us. I have mentioned that I believe this possible harmony may very well be an opening through which God's grace may enter. I am talking of course of inspiration, that necessary gift of fire, without which our writing is just black marks on blank paper. There is never any guarantee that anything you do will result in great art. Nothing will guarantee achievement—not celibacy, not debauchery, not experimental drugs or strict obedience to the Word of Wisdom, not even dedicating three hours of every day to writing guarantees it. Which is not the same as saying that some commitment to regular time for writing is not necessary. Without it, of course, we're not even writing badly. But there is no guarantee. We may labor all our days and create but one very adequate sentence. "How can you ever be sure/ that what you write is really/ any good at all," Merwin asked Berryman. "You can't/ you can't you can never be sure/ you die without knowing/ whether anything you wrote was any good/ if you have to be sure don't write" (271)

We speak casually of the "call" to art. Surely for us the idea of vocation, of calling, should set off some deep and significant vibrations. "If ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?" (Alma 5:26)

For I believe we are creating Zion, not only in the ways we learn to serve and love each other, not only in the worlds we imagine and the light we may create, but also in the way we bring these two apparent oppositions together. I have given up writing from time to time, believing that "after all, my family is more important." But my family

seemed no better off and I was unhappy, muttering and stomping about with undirected rage. And in any case I always found myself roughing out beginnings and endings in my journal and pulling up once-finished pieces for drastic revisions. (Indeed I've discovered that giving up writing seems to be a great spur to my particular Muse.) But about six months ago when once again I felt those pressures bearing down on me, I decided that rather than give it up—since I've never been able to go through with it—I would instead write, but just for my own enjoyment, not get so uptight about it when it wasn't working out, not let it consume me, use it merely as therapy. For two days I fumed in a haze of irritability. In the evening I sat down. I flipped open whatever book of scripture lay at hand, the Doctrine and Covenants. Okay, which one of these sections is shortest, because I'm not wasting any time on this tonight.

Have you heard Joseph's voice from Liberty Jail?: "How vain and trifling have been our spirits, our conferences, our councils, our meetings, our private as well as public conversations—too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the dignified characters of the called and chosen of God" (Smith 137). Gideon Burton reminds us that Nibley glosses *condescending* here as "settling for inferior goods to avoid effort and tension" (229). But that is not what I read that evening. I read these words which I will leave with any of you who may find them as useful as I have:

But with some I am not well pleased, for they will not open their mouths, but they hide the talent which I have given unto them, because of the fear of man. Wo unto such, for mine anger is kindled against them. And it shall come to pass, if they are not more faithful unto me, it shall be taken away, even that which they have.

. . . let them lift up their voice and declare my word with loud voices, without wrath or doubting . . . For I am able to make you holy, and your sins are forgiven you.

. . . Behold, they have been sent to preach my gospel among the congregations of the wicked; wherefore, I give unto them a commandment, thus: Thou shalt not idle away thy

time, neither shalt thou bury thy talent that it may not be known. (D&C 60: 2-3, 7, 13)

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Note

1. I am grateful to Bruce Jorgensen for commenting once in passing that the word "talent" comes from just that sense: "a balance tilted."

Consistency Through Inconsistency: The Literature of Mormon Polygamy

Cheri Pray Earl

The story of the Mormons and polygamy is never told the same way by any two people. Some of the old stereotypes—the licentious old patriarch groping for the seventeen-year-old virgin with his right hand while pounding the pulpit with his left—still abound in Mormon fiction and nonfiction alike. Typically, women are presented either as naive young victims who fall prey to an ideal, forced upon them by patriarchal maniacs, or as calloused pioneer matriarchs who set aside their personal feelings and follow the brethren unflinchingly. While people resembling these characters probably did in reality exist (and still do among those who practice polygamy), they are not necessarily representative of those who have practiced or who still practice polygamy today.

The problem we encounter in trying, through fiction or nonfiction, to get a clearer understanding of the people who practiced polygamy is that each individual work may contain both consistencies and inconsistencies in its presentation of polygamy. In her essay "The Politics of Scarcity," Carol J. Clover explains the same ambiguity in the context of Old English sagas and their feminine characters. Clover explains that there exists a discrepancy between what women ought to do under Anglo-Saxon law and what women really do. She quotes the Anglo-Saxon scholar R. George Thomas as saying that the sagas' two voices address and reflect two spheres. "The sagas," describes Thomas, "give two versions of the status of women in the Saga Age Society—theoretically and legally, a low and unimportant place, but, in practice, an honored and effective one." Similarly, the sagas of the Church may also "give two versions of the status of women" living in polygamy.

The focus of this essay is to expand our understanding of the women who practiced the principle of polygamy by exploring fictional and nonfictional accounts from different periods in the

history of plural marriage. By analyzing the similarities and differences of these accounts, I hope to reveal a more accurate version of women living with polygamy.

One of the earliest accounts of polygamy is the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. Sarah gives her handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham as his second wife so that Abraham might have children. When Hagar becomes pregnant with her first child, Ishmael, Sarah is envious.

And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the Lord judge between me and thee.

But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face. (Gen. 16:5-6)

Hagar flees to the wilderness, possibly with no intention of returning, but is told by an angel of the Lord to return because she is pregnant. In conversation with the angel, Hagar refers to Sarah as her mistress, thus reinforcing Sarah's superior status as first wife in the household.

At the feast given by Abraham to celebrate Isaac's weaning, Ishmael mocks Isaac, and Sarah insists that he and his mother be cast out:

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.

Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. (Gen. 21:9-10)

Abraham is then told by the Lord to listen to Sarah and send Ishmael and Hagar out into the desert. This biblical account of the first recorded polygamous marriage established a precedent for the treatment of the second and subsequent wives

of polygamy in the early Church.

One controversial issue raised by the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar is the status of first wives in polygamous households. From what we know of polygamy in the early days of the Church, the husband often felt obliged to allow the first wife every consideration, just as Abraham treated Sarah with deference. This attitude may have been derived from Abraham's handling of Sarah and Hagar, as well as from Doctrine and Covenants 132:61, where the Lord says that a man is justified in taking a second wife if "the first give her consent." This scripture may have been interpreted by some to mean that the first wife must be given first consideration in everything.

In her autobiography, *In My Father's House*, Dorothy Solomon explains the traditionally accepted status of the first wife in a fundamentalist household:

When I first intuited the power associated with a first wife's status, I grieved over my mother's place far down the list as fourth of my father's plural wives. I knew, for instance, that a first wife went more places with her husband. . . . When I asked my mother about Aunt Gerda's [the first wife] favored status, she said, "Some say the Law of Sarah gives the first wife dominion over the other wives because Sarah in the Bible gave her handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham. . . . I don't believe in that first-wife notion, there's not a word of scripture to support it. We all have the same rights, first or last. Still . . . some people in the group see it the other way. . . ." She paused and smiled to herself. "Especially the first wives." (45-46)

As suggested by Dorothy's mother, an inconsistency exists between doctrine and practice concerning the status of wives in plural marriage. Other such beliefs (or culturalisms) practiced without scriptural basis were prevalent in the early Church and carried over into the modern Church.¹

In her autobiography, *A Mormon Mother*, Annie Clark Tanner remarks that her "[f]ather's idea of living polygamy was to give the first wife first consideration."

If my mother began a complaint when my

father was in her home, about the meager supply of provisions which were doled out by Aunt Mary [the first wife], he walked out. He was following President Young's idea of having distribution of supplies from the first home. (10-11)

According to Annie, Aunt Mary may have been of little help "in making polygamy more endurable" for Annie's mother because of the "religious teachings in the Church at that time. Belief in theological doctrine was more emphasized in the Church, at that time, than practical application of ethical teachings" (12). Notice that Tanner makes a distinction between the religious teachings of the Church and ethical applications, possibly because the doctrines she accepted were sometimes indistinguishable from the culturalisms that relegated second and subsequent wives to an inferior station in polygamous households.

Clory, Maurine Whipple's fictional female protagonist in *The Giant Joshua*, echoes Tanner and Solomon on the hierarchy among the wives of plural marriage. "[H]ere we are, three women married to one man and to only 'Sheba is he 'my husband'; to Willie and me he'll never be anything more than 'Brother Mac'" (112). Throughout the novel, Clory's greatest struggle seems to be finding her status in the household. After her first child is born, she realizes that her status has changed: "[I]t was true that the birth of her baby had given her a different status in the household; she was no longer a child, she was a woman, a woman who could have babies, and even 'Sheba had to respect her position" (243). Sheba's favored status has also changed. Her husband, Abijah, showers his love and attention on Clory, his young third wife. Like Sheba, Sarah's greatest fear may have been that Hagar's status in the household would also change from bondwoman to favored wife after Ishmael's conception and birth.

According to Annie Clark Tanner, women's status in Mormon society was largely defined by priesthood authority:

Obedience to the Priesthood, to the authorities of the Church, and to one's husband, was paramount. My husband and I were both the product of the ideal of our religion, that man

is superior to woman and that he should be obeyed. . . . It was his right to command; it was my duty to obey. (169)

Tanner recounts that her husband asked her to sell her inheritance in Farmington, Utah—a home and land deeded to her by her father—to help finance his struggling farm in Canada. She refused, and then began to doubt whether she was “justified in holding out against my husband” (173). She sought counsel from President Joseph F. Smith, who advised her that she had been more than generous. He said, “Don’t give up your home unless Brother Tanner invites you to a better one” (173).

In order to accept Tanner’s view of the status of men and women in the Church, we also have to accept two crucial assumptions. First, to be truly obedient, women had to concede that they were inferior to men and therefore subject to them. Second, the priesthood leaders of the Church did not, as a matter of course, always sanction the beliefs and practices of the patriarchs of polygamy.

As to the first assumption, while I have been unable to find evidence to support that all women, even most women, believed themselves inferior to men and thereby subject to them, there is evidence to suggest that certain members believed and even encouraged a doctrine that deemed women impure and therefore inferior. Dorothy Solomon recalls that “[s]ome early Church leaders had justified plural marriage and certain other inequities, explaining that women labored under ‘the curse of Eve’”:

Because she had been overly curious, ambitious, and fundamentally jealous of Adam’s relationship with God, Eve and all her sisters were denied the priesthood. As unreliable sources of wisdom (having yielded to temptation), the frailer sex would have to cooperate to bring out the best in a man, thereby conquering jealousy. . . . Still, she was not to be trusted. In our religion, there was original sin for Eve but not for Adam. (169)

Abijah McIntyre, Whipple’s fictional patriarch, based on her own grandfather, supports Solomon’s claim that some early Church leaders considered women weak and inherently sinful:

He resented women, anyway, because he thought in his heart they were the one means of keeping him from being absolutely pure. Women couldn’t quite belong to the Kingdom. He felt that Brother Brigham and he saw eye to eye in that. . . . His favorite sermon was on the theory that behind every sin man ever committed you could find a woman. (182)

While some women may have felt it their responsibility to atone for the sins of Eve or their own inherent wickedness through blind obedience to supposedly superior men, they did not live as though they believed themselves inferior to men. Even Tanner herself, while suggesting that the superiority of men was a prevalent notion among women of the day (54), acted otherwise. After all, according to her autobiography, Annie herself sometimes refused to accept her husband’s judgment as superior to her own, and he eventually informed her that he would no longer be visiting her or providing any financial support to her and their children (236).

Women both obeyed and disobeyed their husbands and other priesthood authorities as they saw fit, much as they do today, without much thought as to their license or competence to do so. Tanner’s story of a young woman invited into polygamy is another example:

I recall that so much pressure was put on one young married couple to enter the principle that at last they decided to make the venture. After a serious discussion about all the girls whom they knew, one was chosen to be the second wife.

“But,” said the young husband, “you must go with me to ask her.”

So the two set out in a buggy and called at the girl’s home. She was there and accepted the invitation to go for a ride. After the purpose of the visit was made known, the girl emphatically declared, “I do not intend to be a plural wife of any man.” (74-75)

In their book *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery suggest that women entered into plural marriage because of their devotion to God, a

devotion demonstrated through loyalty to priesthood authority. Even today, "the majority of faithful Mormons would maintain simply that God commanded plural marriage through the prophet Joseph Smith" (97). Thus, women may have obeyed not because of feelings of inferiority but because of intense faith that the Lord spoke through Joseph Smith. "[W]hether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (D&C 1:38).

Emma Smith's reaction to the revelation on plural marriage counters Tanner's belief that "[i]n those times it was a man's place to create conditions, and a woman's place to accept them" (26). When the revelation on plural marriage now recorded as Doctrine and Covenants 132 was first committed to paper in 1842, Emma Smith "teased" Joseph until he agreed to let her burn it. However, he simply dictated it again to William Clayton (Woodford 1731-37).

Hyrum Smith offered to talk to Emma, confident he could persuade her to accept plural marriage. He said, "If you will write the revelation on celestial marriage, I will take it and read it to Emma, and I believe I can convince her of its truth, and you will hereafter have peace." Joseph finally agreed; but Hyrum returned from his conversation with Emma to report that "he had never received a more severe talking to in his life, that Emma was very bitter and full of resentment and anger" (Woodford 1734).

That Emma struggled with the principle of plural marriage suggests that she felt she had a choice whether to obey her husband or not. That Emma tried to be faithful in living a difficult principle is also evident:

Emma vacillated between reluctant acceptance and determined opposition to . . . [Joseph's] marriages. Leonora Taylor said Emma had received a testimony of the truthfulness of plural marriage. Orson Pratt in an 1869 discourse said that Emma would "at times fight against [Joseph] with all her heart; and then she would break down in her feelings . . . and would then lead forth ladies and place their hands in the hands of Joseph." (Newell and Avery 144-45)

A similar but fictional struggle with obedience to the principle of plural marriage is reflected in Luisa, a character in Margaret Blair Young's book *Salvador*. Luisa's husband, Johnny, commands her to observe the law of polygamy by sanctioning his marriages to other women, but she cannot bring herself to accept her husband's dictum as the will of God. Julie, Luisa's American niece, learns in a conversation with Luisa's adopted son that Luisa chooses to die rather than obey her husband:

"How long has he had other women?"

"Years."

"Luisa has known."

"She has suffered. I told you that. But it is good to suffer. It is better to pass through sorrow, that we may know—"

"Did he tell her she would die?"

"He told her God would take her if she did not support him and the other wives. It was a prophecy. In a blessing, he told her she would die. It was an act of mercy. It gives her time to prepare. Foreknowledge."

"And she hasn't told anyone?"

"She loves him. He is a man of God."

(191)

Like Johnny, some men ventured into their own interpretation of Doctrine and Covenants 132 to justify their additional plural marriages after the Manifesto. Many held to the belief that Wilford Woodruff acted under pressure from the government rather than under inspiration in penning the Manifesto and thereby corrupted Church doctrine. Tanner's second assumption suggests that the leaders of the Church did not always support the practices of such men and, consequently, neither did their wives. Since Mormon women and men believed that "parental authority was Biblical, and obedience to Church authority, which proclaimed . . . modern scripture, was just as binding" (Tanner 15), it is unlikely that a majority of women would *willingly* submit to husbands who did not also willingly submit to the leaders of the Church.

Men who continued to marry additional wives after the Second Manifesto of 1904 were disciplined by Church authorities. Annie Clark Tanner's husband fell into disfavor with the Church leaders because of his post-Manifesto

marriages. He was subsequently released from all of his positions in the Church and from his post as a teacher at the BYU Academy as well (173).

In the prologue to her autobiography, Dorothy Solomon recounts the story of her paternal grandfather, who entered into polygamy after the Manifesto against the advice of Church leaders. He later wrote a book in defense of the principle:

[H]aving served in the Idaho legislature for a good span, Grandfather ran for the U.S. senate. His nomination was all but guaranteed when Church authorities telegraphed that he must withdraw from the race because of his "odious background"—his brief sojourn in polygamy. Grandfather threw down the nomination and trekked to Canada with his family, where he sulked with the weather for three years, then returned to begin a book in defense of the Principle. He married a third wife, and on publication of his book, titled *A Leaf in Review*, he was excommunicated from the Mormon Church. (11)

Solomon's father was later converted to polygamy through his father's book and was also excommunicated.

Tanner's second assumption also appears in Mormon fiction. In Margaret Blair Young's *Salvador*, Johnny is threatened with excommunication for following his personal interpretation of the celestial marriage covenant (225), and the fundamentalist followers of Connor Stuart in Levi Peterson's "The Third Nephite" are ultimately excommunicated for practicing polygamy according to their interpretation of Doctrine and Covenants 132, though to them excommunication becomes a symbol of faithfulness.

It is true that the wives of many of these men appeared to follow their husbands out of a sense of duty or as an act of total submission, but in fact they were often unaware, at least initially, of their husbands' activities. For instance, Annie Tanner was not consulted about her husband's marriages to additional wives, either before or after the Manifesto. J. M. Tanner married his third wife six months after his marriage to Annie without Annie's knowledge or consent (73). Dorothy Solomon's father always promised to get the consent

of his other wives before marrying again, but often did not (238). And of course Abijah McIntyre's fourth wife was a painful surprise to everyone, including her own parents (604-6).

A belief shared by the Latter-day Saints of the early Church and the fundamentalists today is the idea that the only way to the celestial kingdom is through plural marriage. Throughout her autobiography, Annie Clark Tanner continually reminds the reader to bear in mind the context in which polygamy was lived in order to fully understand the people who lived the principle. She explains:

The principle of Celestial Marriage was considered the capstone of the Mormon religion. Only by practicing it could the highest exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom of God be obtained. According to the founders of the Mormon Church, the great purpose of this life is to prepare for the Celestial Kingdom in the world to come. (152)

The prevailing attitude of the members of the early Church was "that if one wanted to attain the very pinnacle of glory in the next world there must be, at least, three wives" (Tanner 65). But however well she may have understood the importance of plural marriage, Tanner never once expressed any love for the principle—only her commitment to obedience. At the time of the Manifesto, she says, "It is true that I, too, rejoiced, because I did not want anyone to have the miserable experience that had been mine. However, it did not occur to me, for one minute, to give up the struggle of living polygamy" (152).

Maurine Whipple sympathetically portrays the intense emotional conflict of men during the pioneer era regarding plural marriage:

Polygamy was the hardest yoke many of them had to bear. The older men, seeing their children going hungry, rebelled against the idea of taking on another wife to raise more children, and the younger men, unable to support one wife properly, could not see the advantage in marrying more than one. (262)

Yet in spite of the difficulty of living the principle, the Saints, men and women alike, obeyed and prevailed over both emotional and practical obstacles. In his essay "Fidelity, Polygamy, and Celestial

Marriage," Eugene England discusses the why's of polygamy:

Why would God require such a strange practice, one counter to standard Christian morality and inherited rationality, one that even contradicted sensible and God-given moral laws—and thus could be practiced only at enormous cost? . . . God apparently uses such a unique and uniquely troubling test because it is the only way to teach us something paradoxical but true and very important about the universe—that trust in our personal experiences with divinity must sometimes outweigh our rational morality. (141)

The Mormon people of the early Church, though their trials were unique, lived their lives much as we in the Church do today. They were individuals in their interpretations of their theology and in the practice of that theology. An examination of their lives based solely on the doctrine, scriptures, culture, or on their fictional or nonfictional sagas would be incomplete. Certain beliefs and practices supported in the fiction and nonfiction are contradicted by scripture and doctrine and vice versa. These contradictions suggest that the members of the early Church sometimes adapted their doctrine to their culture, as in the notion of original sin for Eve but not for Adam, and that they sometimes made mistakes in living their religion, as we often do today. But one principle that accurately describes the people of polygamy remains constant throughout the doctrine and the literature: "We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things" (13th Article of Faith).

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Note

1. These "culturalisms" included the belief that sex was strictly for procreation, that plural marriage was the only gate through which the Saints could enter the celestial kingdom, that three wives were required for exaltation, and that a woman's exaltation depended on her husband. See Solomon 169, Tanner 1, 56, 65.

The Emergence of Mormon Religious Studies and Mormon Regional Studies: Their Significance for Mormon Letters

Eric Alden Eliason

Introduction

This essay has two main themes: (1) to examine the problems inherent in and to offer a justification for Mormon studies, not only as an interdisciplinary movement but also as an institutionally supported academic field, and (2) to examine the place of Mormon literary studies in such a project. This is relatively new territory. Rather than plunging deeply into unexplored realms and constructing a traditionally structured, but scholarly precarious, essay in a vacuum, I will instead try to swing about my flashlight in the darkness, hopefully leaving a residual imprint of the terrain that awaits those of us bent on building a Mormon studies discipline. I believe this approach is a style appropriate to the newness of this topic.

A Personal Essay of Explanation

Since much of what I have to say in this essay grows out of my own personal place in the world of Mormondom and the world of academia, some self-disclosure on my part before moving on would be useful and appropriate. I am the fruit of post-pioneer-era Mormon converts from the 1930s on my father's side; my mother joined the Church, alone in her family, in the 1960s; yet I was born in the covenant and grew up in the Church. Even though these features make me a representative of an increasingly large, probably soon to be the majority, demographic slice of world-wide Mormondom, this "slice" is a barely recognized Mormon subgroup.

I am betwixt and between the two most salient sub-groups in Mormon society. These groups are, of course, (1) "ethnic Mormons" for whom there is no clear line separating family history from the Church's epic history, and (2)

converts to the gospel whose recapitulation of Joseph Smith's personal history of searching for and discovering divine truth also have deep resonance with the great themes of Mormonism's sacred past. This kind of resonance cannot be duplicated but only approached by one such as myself without the right pedigree but nurtured in the bosom of a lifelong faith.

I am also not a literature major. I am a staunch interdisciplinaryist about to begin work on a doctorate in American Studies work at the University of Texas at Austin where I have studied history, folklore, anthropology, and religious studies for my M.A.—usually with the purpose of better understanding my own faith and Mormon identity in the context of other cultural currents. Nevertheless, I have always enjoyed reading fiction as a pastime, and occasionally my reading has strayed into someone or another's idea of a literary canon. I am an interested outsider—or perhaps now a new initiate—to the world of professional Mormon letters. So my comments today should be viewed with these facts in mind.

Recently, I have become a fervent Mormon nationalist in my reading tastes. With a limited amount of time for literature, I have chosen to read, for the time being at least, only those books that are in some way about, or relevant to, the experience of my people. I awoke to Mormon literature by reading Levi Peterson's horrifying and hilarious *The Backslider*, and rapidly consumed *Canyons of Grace*, *The Giant Joshua*, *The Folk of the Fringe*, *The Edge of the Reservoir*, *The Proper Edge of the Sky* (so many geographic and natural landscape metaphors!), *Night Soil*, *Salvador*, *Refuge*, *Bright Angels and Familiars*, and others. I was amazed at the amount, variety, and quality of LDS-related fiction that I could get my hands on.

I was also dismayed at how few Mormons know anything at all about our literary scene. In Mormon literature, I found myself happily awash in a sea of Mormon ideas, Mormon concepts, Mormon perplexities, and Mormon comforts. I must confess that a few years ago I read a bit of Gentile fare with Tony Hillerman's *Thief of Time* and Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*. But *Thief of Time* has a Mormon main character and *The Blithedale Romance* is set in a fictionalized version of Brook Farm—an 1840s Transcendentalist experiment in communal living that was a product of the same antebellum environment of premillennialist and perfectionist fervor in which Mormon communal enterprises first grew.¹

I have a personal suspicion that my anxiousness to fill myself with things Mormon springs in part from my place outside the subgroups we consciously acknowledge and revere in Mormon society. My outsidership in this respect, coupled with a sense of placelessness bred from a childhood and adolescence as a military brat, has caused me to reach out to the state of Utah and Utah/Mormon culture to provide a belated sense of spacio-cultural security and "homeness" that I never found, and never even really knew I needed as a child excited by the transient lifestyle of my globe-trotting family. Here in Deseret I am gathered with the Saints.

I realize this is a rare sentiment in a nationwide Mormonism that seems to increasingly regard "Utah Mormons" as a deficient strain in the breed, even as many of them stream back here from California—the fizzled economic mecca of the now inwardly collapsing ethnic Mormon diaspora of the 1930s to 1950s. Despite, or perhaps because of, the anti-Utahism of others, I am a Utah/Mormon culture romantic, even a Mormon culture romantic nationalist, in love with, and in awe of, a people and a heritage I can never fully and legitimately lay claim to as my own except in the daydreamy realms of my imagination. In this respect I am in good company with other romantics from Herder to Michael Martin Murphy who, in seeking to reclaim a lamentably lost golden age, admit in spite of themselves that it is indeed irrecoverable. I secretly hope that with a Scandinavian surname

like Eliason, someone might assume I am from Brigham City or Ed Geary's beloved Sanpete County.

Mormon Studies: What Should It Be?

Mormon studies is an interdisciplinary movement with much as-yet-unrealized potential. The study of Mormons should take its rightful place in university curricula and departmental structures along with African American studies, Chicano/a studies, Native American studies, and various religious and American regional studies programs. However, there are several problems with developing a Mormon studies discipline along the lines of ethnic and regional studies disciplines. Of course, Mormonism is not exactly an ethnic group as are the subject matters of many of the above-mentioned disciplines.² Mormonism is a chiefly religious social phenomenon—yet it is a religion that makes enough claims about its own exclusivity to be studied in its own right outside the mainstream Christian tradition. Further, Mormonism shapes and permeates people's lives to a degree uncommon outside of small, intense religious sects.³

Mormonism, especially at its historic core in Utah, displays many features of a distinct civilization. Utah has the highest percentage of any one religion found anywhere in North America, and its most formative and significant historical period was one of directed colonization by a theocratic bureaucracy outside of, and in many respects in opposition to, American institutions. This historical phenomenon has left in the Mormon West a unique material landscape and an enduring cultural and social legacy of distinctiveness.

But Mormonism has burst the bounds of its historical homeland to have an increasing presence in North America and the world. Perhaps Islamic studies is the existing interdisciplinary field most comparable to Mormon studies in that its subject matter displays a similar mixture of region, religion, ethnicity, and civilization. In short, while Mormonism as a cultural and religious phenomenon is similar in many respects to other groups who boast of their own interdisciplinary fields, it is also significantly dissimilar in many ways—making the task of developing a Mormon studies

discipline along the lines of existing fields a complex and methodologically hazardous undertaking.

In looking to build a vibrant Mormon studies, perhaps we can look to and draw inspiration from the past to recover roots for this discipline. With the encouragement given to regional studies by the depression-era FWP there was, for a while, a promising embryonic Mormon studies, even before interdisciplinary programs as we now know them came into existence. Charles S. Peterson, in the *Oxford History of the American West*, called pioneers as diverse as historians Dale Morgan and Juanita Brooks, geographer Lowry Nelson, novelists Maurine Whipple and Vardis Fisher, author/historian Wallace Stegner, and sociologist Thomas O'Dea "Utah-Mormon reform regionalists." Since this time, the promise of interdisciplinary Mormon studies has not flowered as it should. Even though much is being done within established disciplinary boundaries and a boom in scholarship on Mormon-related topics has been duly noted by observers of academic trends, little has been done with regards to curriculum development and departmental organization to synthesize these traditions into a coherent Mormon studies discipline.

Aversions to Mormon Studies

Scholars and administrators, who are Mormon in their religious allegiance but not necessarily their subject of academic interest, have been slow to recognize and promote the social and cultural significance of Mormon culture. As a result, Mormon cultural literacy is low. Most college-educated Americans at least recognize the names of Emily Dickenson and Ernest Hemingway, and most college-educated African Americans at least recognize the names of Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes. In contrast, even Mormon graduate students in American literature at BYU seldom recognize the names of Maurine Whipple, Levi Peterson, or Margaret Blair Young.

This situation is nothing less than shameful. Further contributing to the embarrassment we ought to feel about our failure as a society to provide even the most basic education on our heritage and culture is the fact that several prominent Gentile scholars have attempted to chide us

out of our delinquency. In the 1970s, the renowned critic Henry Nash Smith recommended in a review of the course offerings and requirements of BYU's English Department that BYU strive to become the capital of Mormon and Intermountain regional literary scholarship and quit trying to compete nationally with the numerous other programs specializing in Shakespeare and other authors of the "universal" English canon. As recently as May 1994 at the Mormon History Association annual meeting, Patricia Nelson Limerick, a leader in the New Western History movement and deliverer of that year's commissioned prestigious Tanner Lecture, boldly stated that Utah has the most vibrant regional literature scene of any Western state, urged a plenary session full of Mormon historians to rush out and buy Eugene England's short story collection, *Bright Angels and Familiars*, and expressed her amazement that more interdisciplinary scholarship was not yet underway.⁴

One of the handicaps restraining us from building a vibrant interdisciplinary Mormon studies is no doubt the disease that Eugene England has diagnosed as "anti-provincial provincialism," a phenomenon especially prevalent in many Mormon scholars who, educated in the ways of the world, turn their backs on the cultural and intellectual products of Mormondom. They regard Mormon culture, values, and attitudes as at worst embarrassing, and at best quaint. Somehow these scholars suppose that to be respectable in the eyes of academia, we Mormons must recognize our artistic and cultural deficiencies and look to the outside world for redemption. Ironically, this still goes on in an academia that, despite the vitriol of "political correctness" debates, really is beginning to recognize the need to acknowledge and study the contributions of marginal and unpopular cultural and religious groups. Apparently, we are slow to realize that we ourselves can benefit from this shift in the academic political milieu. The argument presented at the 1994 AML annual meeting by Mike Austin in defense of a forcefully constructed discursive space for Mormons in the world of literary criticism can easily be extended to encourage greater treatment of the Mormon experience in other disciplines as well. Austin

outlined the following argument:

Students and professors who are practicing Mormons should be able to use university time and resources to research, write about, and teach about our culture and our literature. We must, in short, insist that our employers and our colleagues accede to the force of their own rhetoric and accord us the same legitimacy now enjoyed by other minority subcultures—not because we have been victimized or oppressed, but because our diverse culture and history has something valuable to offer the field of literary inquiry.

Considering my audience, I may be preaching to the converted by pursuing this line of argument, but I have addressed only one problem. I believe another hindrance to the development of Mormon studies cannot be blamed on worldly contaminations because it resides within ourselves. This problem is the latent fear of the uncomfortable task of defining what peoples Mormon studies should encompass (ethnic Mormons? convert Mormons? orthodox Mormons? jack Mormons? heretics? fundamentalists? RLDS? anti-Mormons?) and, with that in mind, deciding what material (a literary canon, for example) should be used as representative of the major issues in Mormon studies and of the Mormon experience as a historical and geographic whole.

Perhaps one of the thorniest issues in emerging Mormon studies is the fact that, through the immense success of the missionary program, the Mormon world known by the Utah-Mormon Regionalists of yore is only a small part of the worldwide Mormonism of today. Mormonism is as entrenched and as vibrant as ever in the Mormon cultural region, but it has burst its seams to the point that only about 20 percent of today's Mormons are found in Utah. As little as we may like to admit it, this situation means that, although spiritually the Church is as alive and vibrant as ever, the cultural ties that bind—common experience, language, history, region, and ancestry—are quickly evaporating in an expanding, diversifying church. It becomes ever more difficult for the organs that generate Church literature—literature of both artistic and official varieties—to find

common cultural ground upon which to articulate common spiritual themes.

A discussion of what response, if any, is warranted to this dissipation of Mormon ethno-regional-historic identity goes beyond the scope of this paper. (Romantic nostalgia such as my own certainly cannot be expected to sweep through all corners of the Church.) However, it is crucial for any scholar engaged in thoughtfully observing the development of Mormonism today to be aware of this watershed change in the social profile of Mormondom.

A Critique of Mormon Literature

As an approach to examining this issue of increased geographic and cultural diversity in Mormonism, I cite the example of what may be an already familiar critique of the whole concept of a Mormon literature. Although he has not published his thoughts that I know of, Bill Eggington, an Australian professor of English linguistics at BYU, has voiced the opinion, to several of you in this audience I suspect, that there is no such thing as a Mormon literature. He and many others hold that, except for the scriptures, no body of literature speaks to the experience of world-wide Mormonism and that those works which now pass for the Mormon literary canon can more accurately be described as an ethnocentric conceit that reinforces what "missionfield Mormons" have suspected of "Deseret Mormons" all along—namely, that Deseret Mormons unthinkingly assume that (1) they are the only constituents of authentic and significant Mormondom, (2) "missionfield Mormons" form an insignificant appendage to the parent church, when in they fact comprise about 70 percent of today's Church membership, and (3) the experience of "missionfield Mormons" is similar enough to their own that writers from Virginia Sorensen to Jack Weyland will resonate with the concerns, values, and life stories of Mormons in Australia and Peru as much as they do with Mormons in Utah.

There is a certain persuasive power to this position. According to this criticism of Mormon literary studies, there is no true Mormon literary tradition that all Mormons can call their own;

there is only a tradition that some Mormons at the historically significant but now demographically small core would impose upon the rest of Mormondom with little sensitivity to the social realities of the modern world-wide church. Does this mean that the Mormon literature project should be abandoned because it isn't politically correct? Of course not, but the assumption of the universal Mormon relevance of the currently constituted canon of Mormon literature needs to be seriously rethought.

Mormon Regional/Religious Studies

To my mind, a first step in the right direction toward resolving this issue is to develop a not-often articulated but nonetheless crucial distinction in Mormon studies between Mormon regional studies and Mormon religious studies. I believe this distinction (which encompasses much overlapping terrain, of course) can function as a useful tool for examining many problematic areas in Mormon studies. Reexamining what we now call Mormon literature in the light of this division will go a long way toward resolving concerns about the dubious relevance of the presently constituted canon of Mormon literature to the world-wide church. Mormon regional studies would use the boundaries drawn up by geographers like Donald Meinig to delineate a "container" in which all that has entered into, exited from, is now, or was at one time present in, occurs within, or has occurred within it is fair game for investigation and analysis within the purview of this discipline.

These geographic and historical criteria, which leave aside issues of methodological ideological orthodoxy—and in our case, theological orthodoxy—are of the same variety used by American studies and American regional studies disciplines in defining their subject matter. In fact, Mormon regional studies would be a subdiscipline of American studies. American regional studies are subdisciplines whose boundaries are geographically defined have been dividing up the American landscape over the years. The most advanced of these fields is Southern studies as evidenced by the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Wilson and Ferris). New England studies is pressing close with the *Encyclo-*

pedia of New England Culture due out in 1995 from Yale University Press. Though the Mormon cultural region is smaller in size and population, as well as less venerable than these two regions, we can certainly make the case that our region's history and culture are just as distinctive and identifiable, as, if not more so in many ways, than that of New England and the South.

Mormon religious studies, on the other hand, would be a broader designation. A subfield of religious studies, it would use the interdisciplinary approach of the broader field as a model. In Mormon religious studies, Mormon regional studies would, of course, occupy a rightfully central place, considering its significant role in the history of Mormonism and its current cultural impact on the rest of Mormondom.

As much as we may fail to realize it or hate to admit it, Mormon "literature" of both the literary and popular variety is mostly for, by, and about Deseret Mormons. Jack Weyland and Levi Peterson would be equally baffling to most international Mormons. With this in mind, we should be more conscientious in pointing out that Mormon literary studies today belong more fully within the purview of the Mormon regional studies subdivision of Mormon studies.⁶ Imagine a Brazilian or Dutch Mormon with no previous ingrained exposure to Utah's hunting subculture or the rigors of irrigation-reliant colonization trying to resonate with any "common Mormonness" in the characters in Douglas Thayer's "Opening Day" or Virginia Sorensen's "Where Nothing Is Long Ago." These are two of Mormon literature's greatest short stories, and all Mormons could benefit from them and appreciate them as exercises in empathy with fellow humans struggling with moral issues. But what do we say about the Mormonness of a Dutch or Brazilian Mormon who—although he or she may appreciate and empathize with the characters in these stories—does not identify with the historical and contemporary Mormon regional culture background of these blithely named "Mormon" short stories? "Opening Day" and "Where Nothing Is Long Ago" are regional Mormon short stories, but not universal Mormon short stories. They highlight the cultural gap between "Deseret Mor-

mons" and "mission-field Mormons."

I think I can further illustrate what I see as the differences in content between Mormon religious studies and Mormon regional studies by sharing (1) the table of contents of a proposed book on Mormon religious studies and (2) the reading list of the syllabus for a proposed course on "Mormon Country." The selections are drawn from the practical worlds of academic publishing and course preparation.

Mormonism Observed:

Essays on Mormon Culture and Society

Preface and Acknowledgments

Introduction

Mormon Identity

- Dean L. May. "Mormons." *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*. Ed. Stephen Thernstrom (Cambridge: Belnap, 1980): 720-31.
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A Peculiar People

- Nathan O. Hatch. "The Populist Vision of Joseph Smith." Excerpt. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1992. 113-22.
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- Mario De Pillis. "The Persistence of Mormon Community into the 1990s." *Sunstone* (October 1991): 28-49.

Exploring the Mormon Homeland

- D. W. Meinig. "The Mormon Culture Region: Strategies and Patterns in the Geography of the American West, 1847-1964." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55 (June 1965): 191-220.
- Jan Shipp. "Beyond the Stereotypes: Mormon and Non-Mormon Communities in Mormon-

dom." *New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington*. Eds. Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1987. 343-60.

- Richard Poll. "Utah and the Mormons." *Ibid.*, 323-41.

The Mormon Future

- Thomas F. O'Dea. "Sources of Strain and Conflict," and "Epilogue." *The Mormons*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957. 222-63.
- Grant Underwood. "Mormonism, Millenarianism, and Modernity." *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993. 139-42.
- Michael Hicks. "Noble Savages." *Mormonism and Music: A History*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989. 209-27.
- Rodney Stark. "Modernization and Mormon Growth: The Secularization Thesis Revisited." *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*. Eds. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1994. 13-23.

Epilogue

- Richard Burton. Excerpt. *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861.

Exploring 'Mormon Country'

Reading list for a proposed course on Mormon Regional Studies

Writing about the Region

- Wallace Stegner. *Mormon Country*
- Juanita Brooks. *Quicksand and Cactus*
- Edward Geary. *The Proper Edge of the Sky*

The Utah of the Imagination

- Maurine Whipple. *The Giant Joshua*. Or Virginia Sorensen. *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*
- Wallace Stegner. *Recapitulation*
- Levi S. Peterson. *The Backslider*
- Orson Scott Card. *Folk of the Fringe*
- Tony Hillerman. *Thief of Time*

Environmental Voices

- Edward Abbey. *Deseret Solitaire*
- Terry Tempest Williams. *Refuge*
- John B. Wright. *Rocky Mountain Divide: Selling and Saving the West*

Reference Works

- *Utah Atlas and Gazetteer*
- Dean L. May. *Utah: A People's History*

Conclusions

I hope that this chapter list and syllabus give an idea of the distinction I am trying to make between the study of the Mormon region—including the significant contributions of various Gentile communities—and the broader project of the study of the Mormon religion. I am sure you noticed the heavy emphasis on literary works in the regional studies course and the absence of literature in the Mormon studies book. At this time in our history, such a bifurcation is appropriate. I don't mean to suggest that dividing the world of Mormon studies into regional and religious subdivisions is a panacea for all problems facing this emerging discipline. Also, I certainly do not mean to suggest that the current canon of Mormon literature by, about, and for Deseret Mormons is of no worth and value to the rest of us. I, for one, have enjoyed and benefited from it immensely.

I do believe, however, that the current Mormon literary canon could be of more use in educating all Mormons, regardless of their geographic and genealogical situations, and would be more favorably received by the institutional structures that might support the study of Mormon literature, if we actively counteract the unstated assumption that it is a body of literature that speaks universally to the concerns of all Mormons. By putting what we now call Mormon literature into the context of a Mormon regional studies project, we may defuse some of the resistance to it and increase its chances of becoming seriously studied. We may even begin to counteract some of the anti-Utahism of many Mormons and help lead them to an appreciation of this region's culture. Commensurate with this task of redefining the place of Mormon literature would be increased cooperation between scholars of various disciplines to build up Mormon regional studies. The result of this effort will hopefully be the emergence of an institutionally supported Mormon studies program with interdepartmental faculty committees and the offering of Mormon studies minors, and eventually the emergence of a discipline complete with departments and degrees at several universities.⁷

I realize the solutions I offer here may be unsatisfactory to Mormon literary critics who

would like to see the emergence of a significant body of high-quality Mormon literature spiritually and culturally resonant with and relevant to the lives of all Mormons everywhere. When and if a such a literature arises—if such a literature is indeed possible in our rapidly diversifying church—we can rethink Mormon literature's place in the discipline of Mormon studies.

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- Wilson, Charles Reagan, and William Ferris, eds. *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989.

Notes

1. Alice Felt Tyler discusses the "common ancestry" of the Transcendentalist Brook Farm and Mormonism's Law of Consecration and Stewardship.
2. For an examination of the concept of Mormons as an ethnic group, see Eric Alden Eliason, ed., *A Mormon Studies Reader* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, forthcoming).
3. Jan Shippis sketches both arguments for treating Mormonism as a "special case."
4. Limerick dropped the specific reference to England's work when she published the lecture in the *Journal of Mormon History*, Fall 1995, perhaps because England was present at the lecture and it provided a pleasant in-group reference that was less appropriate for a reading audience. She includes an extensive list of works she already read as background for her lecture.
5. Shippis uses "Deseret Mormon" to describe Mormons who, regardless of where they live now, grew up in a predominantly Mormon area of the West and whose ancestors participated in the

sacred historical drama of immigrating to and colonizing these regions.

6. Among major exceptions to this generalization are Mormon writer Walter Kirn, *My Hard Bargain* (New York: Knopf, 1990), who won acclaim in part for his portrayal of his family's conversion to Mormonism in Wisconsin. Orson Scott Card's science fiction and fantasy have achieved remarkable popular success while articulating Mormon themes and concerns. However, even Card recognizes the usefulness of the Mormon cultural region concept. It forms the central organizing principle in the setting of his post-apocalyptic collection of novellas and short stories, *The Folk of the Fringe* (New York: Tor, 1989).

7. The Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at BYU has an interdisciplinary Mormon studies minor to be offered by the university well underway.

The Boon: A Temporary Summing Up

Marden J. Clark

Note: This paper is a version of the final chapter of a rather lengthy autobiography which I have conceived from the beginning as a very minor kind of archetypal journey/quest—hence the title, especially the “temporary.” And hence some of the references that may seem rather unusual. It can hardly pass as literary scholarship but may be of interest as an attempt at literary autobiography.

Any quest can hardly be considered a success from which the hero doesn't return with a boon—some kind of a reward for his struggles and suffering and bravery, or some kind of saving feature for the fair lady or for the tribe or nation or for all humanity. Odysseus returns with the strength to rid his home of the suitors and provide Penelope with a hero husband. Beowulf returns several times, having saved his people from divers monsters. Dante returns, having been vouchsafed the ultimate vision of beatitude, which he can now share with the world. Milton's Christ, having resisted the temptations of Satan, is ready to set about his task of saving humankind. For Mormons Jesus returns to the Father having prepared the way for that salvation.

The epic hero returns with a boon.

Since from the beginning I have defined my quest in terms that can hardly admit of such comparisons, except as a means of clarification or of irony, I hardly have to insist that mine has been at best a minor epic. In fact, if I were any good at that kind of thing I probably should do all this as mock epic. We can hardly expect, therefore, a major boon. I'm not even sure I come back with enough to save myself, to say nothing of saving my people or all humankind. But by taking liberties with the idea, I can indicate at least components that, taken together, can define something of a boon to share for these three score and eighteen years.

First, a few of the things I have not found: I

still lack most of the sense of certainty that one might expect after so much questing. I have lived to see nearly everything that I had arrived at some certainty about along the way—politically, socially, economically, literarily, educationally, even spiritually/religiously—profoundly challenged or summarily discarded in the last decade or two. If I were inclined that way, it could be profoundly disillusioning.

Politically, our nation survived Richard Nixon, so I suppose it will survive Ronald Reagan and George Bush, even if precariously. And it will probably survive Bill Clinton—and even Newt Gingrich.

Regardless, I have lived to see all my early qualms about Nixon and Reagan only too justified; to see the Democrats largely inept (and often as crooked as their opponents) in opposition; to see the politics of fear and hatred dominate our national and international relations; to see Utah politics, except for some fine Democratic governors, dominated by people who promote the very agenda that I find most distasteful, including all the hate-Russia stuff and the resulting insane build-up of destructive power, and more recently all the immigrant- and poor- and helpless-bashing that resulted in the horror of California's Prop 187 and the Republican sweep of the elections. Even amid the glow and chest-beating over the Persian Gulf, our astronauts were up there in space carrying on experiments for Star Wars. Right now, I find it hard to imagine a more dangerous or futile expenditure of a nation's or a world's resources.

Worse than any of these, though, at least in a strictly political sense, I find my faith in the democratic process profoundly challenged by the level at which political victories are being won and lost. How can we really have meaningful democracy when a man can be elected president of the United States by a combination of dirty political tricks and inane slogans: “Read my lips: NO NEW

TAXES!?" Or when we have year-long political campaigns in which the only candidates to really face the issues can't get past the primaries; in which hundreds of millions of dollars are spent, most of it contributed by people or organizations that surely are expecting some return for their money (hence will have the new president—and any who accept the money—beholden to them)?

Socially, we are seeing some of the most important gains of the last forty years either profoundly challenged or actually reversed: civil rights (an atmosphere that makes possible the reemergence of neo-Nazi groups); poverty programs, resulting in the emergence of terrible homelessness in the richest country in the world; and all the rest. Perhaps we had gone too far with some of our social programs. I find myself somewhat ambivalent about some women's rights issues, positively opposed to abortion as a means of birth control, and distressingly ambivalent about such things as gay rights—especially with so much evidence telling us that sexual "orientation" may be largely outside the individual's will. But the evidence I see is that our social consciousness and conscience have become badly calloused.

Economically, I can only resort to clichés: We moved in eight years from the world's greatest creditor nation to the world's greatest debtor nation; we saw the biggest transfer of wealth in history from those who didn't have enough to those who already had too much; we generated history's biggest binge of credit spending, both governmental and personal; we generated some of history's largest-scale criminals and scandals . . . Complete the dreary list with your own favorites. It's even become something of a cliché to note that almost no one on the political scene, especially our president, is willing to make the hard choices to restore us to anything like fiscal responsibility: the choices that would involve cutting back on such things as the entitlement programs or that would force us toward ecological responsibility, or that would really reduce the waste of our arms production and vast military expenditures. It's hard to believe that the president is actually proposing a \$25 billion increase. I claim little economic wisdom. But it doesn't take much to see where our

biggest problems lie and where whatever of hope for our economic salvation must also lie.

Literarily, nearly every linguistic and literary certainty by which I have lived and which came so hard earned has been profoundly challenged in recent decades. Language that had seemed such a solid thing and literary method that had seemed so rewarding—both suddenly became slippery and indeterminate. The close formal analysis of literature that I gloried in and that seemed so meaningful in my reading and teaching—now almost scoffed at by the new generation of critics and teachers. We may be moving back toward some kind of solidity in such things now, but the challenge will always be there.

Educationally—ah, here I should have no problems. Utah is proud of its record in education. Justly so, in many respects. But my misgivings just won't go away. They have something to do with the current debates at BYU over academic freedom and responsibility. But they run much deeper. I have outlined most of them in essay form elsewhere. Here I want to comment only on the irony that my son-in-law, Bruce Campbell, keeps prodding me with: the irony of a people who have a spiritual zeal to have large families yet who are unwilling to tax themselves to pay for a superior education for those large families. Utah's pride in its education rests primarily on the various measurements of the results, showing Utah students near the top in educational achievement. But the most recent statistics that I am aware of show Utah at the very bottom of all the states in expenditure per pupil. And Utahns seem proud of that fact.

Perhaps they should. The two measures do suggest efficiency. But I always squirm when I hear such statistics. I distrust efficiency as either standard or goal. It bypasses most of the complex meanings and aims of education that I prize.

Besides, the notoriously low level of teachers' salaries in Utah suggests that a large part of the efficiency is loaded onto the backs of the teachers. But enough of that. The 1992 elections in Utah showed once more that almost anyone can win votes here by promising to reform the educational establishments. Utah's students are a major part of

our webwork. I hate to see us give them less than we are able to.

In my religious/spiritual world, the challenges may have been the greatest, perhaps only because here I am most easily hurt. I have seldom been really comfortable with autocratic leadership in the Church. I must admit, though, that any discomfort has seldom come from the president of the Church, whoever he was. With many in the Church, I have been saddened by the repeated experience of seeing the president grow old and feeble, unable to handle the awesome responsibilities any longer and having to rely on counselors to carry the real burden of leadership. But I have looked in awe at the energy and power of these men as they assumed the presidency, especially of course President McKay and President Kimball. And certainly President Hunter now.¹ One would have to be sadly alienated not to feel his love and his concern with Jesus' basic teachings. Not the president, then, but the Elder Petersens, the Elder McConkies, the Elder Packers—those that give the most authoritarian pronouncements, especially if they are pronouncements I don't really care to hear—with these I still feel uncomfortable.

I'm afraid that a measure of my faith in them is the comfort I nearly always find in the sense that they too are simply human, that even as spokesmen for the Church they can sometimes be wrong. It was a great moment for me when I read Elder McConkie's talk to Institute teachers describing the process by which President Kimball received and affirmed the revelation making the priesthood available to all faithful male members of the Church. McConkie said, though in a historical context of "a priority basis" and a "divine timetable," that he and all the others had previously spoken with "limited understanding" about the scriptural evidence that barred blacks from the priesthood.

A related question still bothers me: I can't understand the Church's vigorous, even virulent opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. Perhaps all those dire predicted consequences were inherent in it, and perhaps it should have been defeated. But neither the indirect and devious approaches to its defeat nor the highly emotional

direct attacks have seemed to me justified.

In fact, I find myself in almost full sympathy with the women's movement as it has developed in the Church. All my comfort and assurance in my traditional role as "priesthood head of the home" with my wife as helpmeet for me, all the official Church glorification of mother as lifegiver and homemaker, all the positive things about a patriarchal order—with almost none of this can I any longer feel very comfortable. A patriarchal society, almost by definition, places women in an inferior position. In spite of repeated warnings about unrighteous dominion, I have seen altogether too much abuse by husbands of their priesthood authority—"She's *my* wife. She's supposed to obey *me*, to be *my* helpmeet . . ."—to wish any woman the kind of subservience some men subject their wives to.

Such reflections and such awareness of abuse even make me sympathetic with the idea of women being given the priesthood, though my selfish sense of propriety and position reels. I find it difficult to think of praying to a Mother in Heaven, but I believe deeply in her. And I believe just as deeply in the innate superiority of women in most qualities and situations that are important to me—even if I often have trouble treating Bess with the deference that would really recognize superiority.

Even if she is superior, I don't want her or any other woman pushing bayonets in Iraq. I don't want *anyone* pushing bayonets *any* place. Another of the really painful religious problems for me is to understand the attitudes I see everywhere around me toward war and armaments. If President Kimball's statements about war can be accepted as anything like official Church doctrine, most of our people cannot accept that doctrine. If any modern prophet's words seemed totally prophetic, these do to me now. I have to repeat them here, even though many of you know them by heart.

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for

protection and deliverance. When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Saran's counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting the Savior's teaching: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." (6)

The context says that President Kimball was thinking of both the American people as a whole and of his own Mormon people. And it seems to me a totally accurate picture of what happened as we responded to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. What we did to Iraq may have been deserved by Saddam, but surely not by the Iraqi people. What we are experiencing as an aftermath of our invasion should tell us at least some of the consequences of ignoring the Savior's teaching. There have to be better ways to love your enemy than by bombing him into submission.

On a much more immediate level, I can't forget the response Bess and I had some time ago when we drove up through the new area just north and east of the Provo Temple. Even the most beautiful of those new homes struck us as monstrosities: so huge, so lavish, so far beyond what any family could possibly justify as need. Perhaps our year in China conditioned our response. But we kept using the word *obscene* to catch our reaction, even knowing that we were using it inaccurately. Obscene in the face of the massive human need we had seen only the edge of in China. Obscene in the face of our own country's homeless and suffering people. Obscene in the amount of the world's limited resources that had gone to feed primarily human vanity. I kept remembering the stern voice of Wesley Lloyd in a philosophy class: "The body can use only so much and then we start feeding the ego. And the ego is insatiable." Even our own comparatively modest home now seems lavish in the face of such problems. It's hard to see any of us who are so comfortably or lavishly placed as really consecrating ourselves to Him or His kingdom.

Most recently, the excommunicating and

disfellowshipping, the summoning to Church courts, the hiring/firing based on expressed opinions or research—these have all taken a terrible emotional toll on me, as on the whole community I am a part of. I, too, long for, in Richard Poll's words, "a Mormon chorus in which almost all the singers hear the dissonant sounds of the alterative voices as polyphonic enrichment of the message of the gospel music" (38).

Those people living with only the overpasses for shelter! And tens of thousands of others with not even that! And those 1.2 billion people in China! And the millions of hungry and starving in India and Africa! All the horrors of Somalia and Bosnia . . . Just the listing conjures up three of the most basic images that have troubled yet comforted my mature years. Though closely related, none is original with me. The first I owe to Robert Penn Warren: the image of the world as "all of one piece," as "an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle and is drowsy no more but springs out to fling the gossamer coils about you who have touched the web and then inject the black, numbing poison under your hide" (200). Warren is using the image to suggest the complex interconnections of the world and of human experience, and in this particular context to condemn his characters' refusal to accept responsibility for their actions.

This image from the biological/moral world is closely related to one from the world of physics: my wonderful old physicist friend Harvey Fletcher striking his fist on the table between us and saying, "When I strike this, every molecule, every atom in the table is affected, just as when you throw a pebble in the pond and the ripples fan out to touch every point of the shore. Not only that but the ripples fan out to affect every other molecule in the world, even throughout the universe. And the effect is almost instantaneous, even across those vast distances of space." Dr. Fletcher, the inventor of stereophonic sound, and his wife on one side of the table, Harlow and I on the other side, simply doing our home teaching. That I remember so vividly this image and that it continues to resonate

so deeply suggest also its psychological truth.

The third image is the simple one of webwork I use to define the complex of relationships that still live for Bess and me as we remember our experiences with the BYU 29th Ward or the BYU faculty and students, or more recently our Chinese colleagues and friends: the kind of web that results from weaving: the warp and woof that make a beautiful carpet or hanging or doily.

Taken together, my three images define what seems both most distressing and most precious in human relations and human experience. One cannot touch the spider web without making it vibrate. And just living makes one touch it. But where one touches it and how and maybe when—these make all the difference. Some of the effects of touching it can be either terribly negative or very positive, as most teachers and many students must have found out someplace along the way. It is no light thing to touch that web.

The compensating quality, though, is that the web or webwork, the ripples and vibrations, become the human family and all that is meaningful in the way we relate to one another. Like it or not, no man is an island. We *are* all involved in mankind, that is, in one another. We can violate that involvement by manipulating one another or one another's resources, as in the massive manipulations of the stock market, or the massive manipulation of peoples into war, or the exploitation of people by whatever means, or as, on the other end of the scale, simply trifling with another's affections or taking advantage of someone's innocence.

Or we can use that involvement to somehow help ease the burdens of pain and suffering and sorrow. If Jesus had given us no other precept than those implied in the care given by the Good Samaritan, or if his gospel gave us no other gift than the opportunity and impetus to serve one another, we would still have the pearl beyond price. We would probably recognize as ultimate good the service of a Mother Teresa, even without Him or His gospel. But her effect on our webwork, her touching of so many human lives, can surely give all of us in our own far less divine way something of the same divine quality. Maybe that is all I can or should ask for. But the very asking

makes me only too uncomfortably aware of how far my life falls short.

I believe profoundly in that webwork and in the most powerful expression of it that I know: the image of the whole human family as sons and daughters of God and hence as our brothers and sisters. I accept fully the implications of that belief. Other than in our acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I can see no fundamental difference between white Mormons and black Americans or black Africans or Chinese or Hindus. I am most uncomfortable with Chinese-bashing or black-bashing or Arab-bashing or immigrant-bashing—or any kind of bashing of our Father's children.

Yet even the images of webwork carry their own problems and emotions. I keep thinking that I've long since made peace with most of the basic religious/theological questions, but it has often been an uneasy peace. The questions surface every time we see the terrible evidence of massive and undeserved suffering in that webwork: the horrors of Chernobyl, of typhoons in Bangladesh or Florida, of famines in Africa and India. Such events numb us with their sheer massiveness and our sense of helplessness. And not even the answers I've come to with such pain and struggle seem to help much, nor do the efforts at tentativeness and faith. I've learned to live with paradox. But some of the paradoxes threaten to overwhelm.

"How," Bess is asking the questions now, "how can God really care about us if he can stand by and watch all that suffering and horror?" Or, on the personal end of the scale, "How can Harlow, the one in the family with the most implicit faith and goodness, the one most faithful and loving in his prayers and tithes and offerings and the most selfless in his concern for others, be the one with the most intractable and distressing personal problems? What about the promises to pour out blessings?"

The two questions can frame most of what I still struggle with. Those interested enough can go to poems and essays for the more detailed explorations. But I want to just tease briefly at two more framing questions, one cosmic, the other almost too simple and personal. Neither will be new.

I know of few more sublime visions of the

restored gospel than that of eternal progression, the vision of every person's potential that for most of us stops with the celestial kingdom, eternal families, and eternal joy. But more and more I hear people almost drooling over eternal increase and becoming gods in our own right. That too is a majestic vision. But I find it troubling that it has so little appeal for me. Somehow I can't covet power in eternity, any more than I have really coveted it here.

The corollary to eternal increase and eternal godhood has to mean eternal and ever-increasing responsibility and, with it, pain. We all contemplate with awe and love our Savior's pain and occasionally even the Father's pain over what his son had to endure. Some very few of us may feel some of the Mother's pain for both of them *and* for all of us. But we almost never come to any sense of what they have to endure as they contemplate the mess their children are making of the earth they created for us. Not in the wildest flights of my earth-bound imagination can I conceive myself capable of bearing either the responsibility or the pain.

After that, the other must seem at best trivial and at worst silly. But I continue to live with an increasing but modest dissonance: simply that I've had it too good; that my life as a teacher has been positively joyous, even with the struggles; that I've responded only with feelings and pocketbook to some of the most critical problems of the world; even that I keep talking about all this as a kind of refrain but continue to do little about it.

Maybe much of this can be summed up through Albert Schweitzer's retrospective statement: "Two perceptions cast their shadows over my existence. One consists in my realization that the world is inexplicably mysterious and full of suffering; the other in the fact that I have been born into a period of spiritual decadence in mankind" (219). That mysterious and suffering world presided over by a just and loving Creator and Savior: that's the essence of one paradox. The spiritual decadence in humankind, just at the time when the Church is supposed to be bringing the heaven to save humankind: that's the other.

And Yet . . .

And so I've found no pot of gold at the end of any rainbow. Except vicariously, I've been given no ultimate vision of the Celestial Rose with the saints dancing around the Heart of Light in total harmony. I haven't even been able to arrive at a simple and total testimony. My life has certainly not been one of simple and total goodness.

And yet . . . And yet I've found, if no pot of gold, a large amount of rainbow, sometimes vivid and sometimes muted, but rainbow. I've had my own muted but very meaningful kinds of vision. I have had adventures of importance to me, have tilted at a few windmills and rejoiced in my own special lady. I have found my own kind of testimony, not simple and total but complex and growing. I trust that I've at least achieved some kind of goodness, if only in the valuing of simple goodness. And though I may do a lot of yearning, I am most certainly a Mormon, and a Mormon by choice and testimony. I have come to profound awareness and awe at the universality and wisdom of opposition in all things, and to the same kind of awareness and awe at the value of making the journey, of carrying on the quest.

Certainly one of the most joyful developments has been all that is represented by our being here today. I am no longer a mistruster of Mormon literature. We discovered a substantial body of significant Mormon literature almost at the beginning of this organization. And the body is growing now faster than any of us could have dreamed at the beginning. I like the metaphor of the growing body; dead though the metaphor may be, this body is surely organic, marvelously alive and creative. I rejoice at being a minor part of it.

I may have made of myself on my quest, then (and had others help make of me), some kind of an alloy: certainly not gold, but maybe with an occasional lustre that comes from something genuine in the mix; not diamond, maybe an occasional sparkle; not able to be beat into airy thinness, but possibly with a different kind of strength.

Or, to change my metaphors and use once again T. S. Eliot's, "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring /

Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." I may never, at least in this life, achieve the "quickness" he defines nor his "condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)." But I do have complete faith that "all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well / When the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one" (145). All this is Eliot's symbolic version, at the end of the *Four Quartets*, of Dante's final vision of the saints circling in eternal dance and harmony around the Celestial Rose. It has had, for a quarter of century now, something of the force of personal though vicarious vision for me.

Strangely, only in a very recent rereading of this final chapter have I become aware of how badly it slights what couldn't have been so recent an insight: that, at least for me, the quest itself, the journey as journey, may well be the real boon. All the family and friends and colleagues and loved ones that I have picked up along the way! I suddenly catch an image of them gathered around me as I sit struggling at this computer. They are looking down in both compassion and good-tempered disapproval—compassion for my struggle, disapproval for all that I still fail to understand. And maybe there's some condescension for my flying so high at times, working so hard to define experiences on so high a level of abstraction, trying so hard to understand on a complex level things that they understand with feelings if not with logic.

When we moved to Oak Lane nearly a third of a century ago, there was only one nest of green on our lot: a cluster of Chinese elms that every summer attracted ugly beetles that left the leaves skeletonized. The canal separating us from the Jacobs, though, was lined with volunteer plum bushes. Across the canal, William F. Edwards had planted dozens of evergreens, forming a fine protective circle of green around their home. The pines and spruce now block out much of our view of the valley, the view that made us love our lot in the first place.

We look out now and see trees instead of

town and lake. Bess frets more but both of us see the irony. For me it is gradually taking on symbolic value: though the trees obscure our distant view, they are beautiful in their own right. They become our view.

Only part of it, though. The elm trees are gone, but so is the bare and barren soil. In their place is a fertile and productive garden—grass, lilacs, irises, remarkably heavy-bearing raspberries, grapevines (running altogether too wild), apple, pear, peach, and nectarine trees, walnut trees, corn rows, carrots, squash, and all the rest. Surely not the most productive of gardens and one that attracts every bug, virus, and mildew. But also a very satisfying garden, to both the palate and the eye. It can stand as metaphor for a life imperfectly lived but lived in a struggle for creative and productive fulfillment.

Eliot's vision is far more than I can hope for myself. And yet my faith tells me that all of us can hope for some version of his total grace. *We will* arrive where we started. *We will* know the place for the first time. And it will be a different place because we will be different. And the difference will be something that we can glory in as well as find glory in. And for now at least, that is enough for me.

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Note

1. This essay was written and read to the Association for Mormon Letters before the death of President Hunter in March 1995, which saddened all of us. My comments would certainly apply to President Hinckley now.

Ramona Wilcox Cannon as Woman and Writer

Ariel C. Silver

It is a pleasure to share with you a measure of the life of a Mormon woman who has come to attract my attention and admiration—Ramona Stevenson Wilcox Cannon. To position her for you, let me summarize a few central elements of her experience before describing in greater depth some of her thinking:

- Ramona's life bridged from the pioneering of Utah to the emergence of the international Church. She was born forty years after the pioneers arrived in the Salt Lake Valley and died in 1978.
- Saving money for an education beginning in her childhood, she studied at the University of Berlin and became the third woman in Utah to obtain a master's degree.
- She taught at the University of Utah and secondary schools in five languages: English, German, French, Spanish, and Latin.
- She was one of the earliest Mormon women to focus on and publish many articles about important women both in and out of the LDS Church.
- Her most extensive writing came after she was sixty, when she published over four thousand articles. Her topics ranged from Simon Bolivar, the South American liberator, to nature and conservation, to rafting down the Colorado River.
- With all her intellectual accomplishment, she felt that her greatest and most rewarding intellectual challenge was raising seven children, several of whom went on to national accomplishment, and all of whom appreciated her loving role as mother and educator.
- She maintained a rich understanding of the elevating and motivating power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for both men and women. When her husband presided over the British Mission, she headed the British Relief Society and wrote monthly for the *Millennial Star*.

She also published frequently in other Church publications throughout her life.

- In her latter years, she became a wise counselor to an entire community by writing the Mary Marker advice column in the *Deseret News* until age eighty-six.

As I have pored over more than a hundred thousand pages of the personal archives of this "matriarch of the middle years," as historian Maureen Ursenbach Beecher has characterized her, and studied and pondered her professional writings, she has engaged my excitement and my interest. Another biographer of women described perfectly the experience when she said:

An historian who is a diligent biographer sees a life in the round, from many perspectives; from intimate records of inner life to public pronouncements. Soon the handwriting is as familiar as one's own, the characteristic habit of speech leaps from many different texts to proclaim the author, the faded photographs evoke the rich, full context of a life, and the memories of friends seems like the researcher's own. (Conway 65)

Though Ramona is a woman of the past, I have heard her voice in the present, speaking to the concerns of women today who want to magnify the range of their talents—from homebuilding to constructing a meaningful career. Indeed, I have been riveted by the way in which her life continues to respond to and provide answers for the persistent questions of the intellectually and spiritually minded woman.

The themes about which Ramona wrote were derived from her own religious commitment, her intellectual curiosity, and her courageous life—which included successfully surviving cholera, typhoid fever, and diphtheria as a youth, saving her small funds for ten years to see a classical drama about Christ, studying at the most prestigious university in Europe, climbing the Egyptian

pyramids in a long dress as a young woman, settling her family for three years in a small South American town, securing income for her family through writing during the Great Depression, supporting her husband in two consecutive mission calls and other important Church positions while the children were still young, returning to graduate work and full-time employment as a journalist at age sixty, serving as a teacher both in the Church and in the community, and counseling countless women, young and old, about careers and personal concerns. Her gentle exhortations in print and in private to be thrifty, to be faithful, to be educated, to be self-reliant, and to be of service, were ones to which she herself adhered.

Her adventures—both common and unconventional—are accentuated by their time and place. But it was her perspective on life—her engagement with it—more than the era in which she lived, that qualifies her thought and experience to us. Examining the life of a woman born more than a hundred years ago now may seem a little like entering the British Museum. Ramona once described that very experience: “After you break through its musty outer crust and reach its inner consciousness, you uncover a past world still pulsating with the drama and romance of life” (“Half”).

My hope this afternoon is to illuminate her attitude toward life and her approach to it in the manner she expressed it. In her writing, Ramona left her own record. Called in her patriarchal blessing to be “wise in counsel among her sex,” we hear her sober female voice in the shadow of print. The autobiography she left, though incomplete, details much of her own life and the articles she wrote deliver the lives of others to us. These sources offer us the rich reflections of a woman well-schooled in both ideas and the experiences of life.

It is important to note that her prolific writing over a period of sixty years often did concern women—highlighting their achievements, addressing their questions, inspiring their further progress. Preserved from death at a very young age, she was given the impression that “God had bestowed a special blessing on me” and had called

her “to some particular work.” She decided from that point on to be “humble and prayerful, faithful and willing to serve” (“Mislaide” 21). To her, the stake patriarch foretold that “many of riper years will honor your judgment and the younger will rejoice in your teaching.”

During her girlhood, many desires danced before the eyes of her imagination. In her own words, she was “reaching vaguely for the ideal of being good while at the same time doing all sorts of interesting things along the way” (“Child” 2). In her dream-filled youth, she admitted, she “had friends, yet she felt lonely.” Not one of them wanted to be a writer or a musician or an actress or a traveler, as she did, and they “were not particularly fond of reading. All were planning to be good mothers and homemakers” (Excerpts n.p.) Ramona also wanted to be devoted to these domestic roles but from an early age was inclined to prepare herself academically as well. She later suggested that her father’s earnest encouragement to pursue a college education had made her whole life, including her life as a wife and mother, “better and more interesting” (qtd. in Pedersen).

When she was thirteen, a letter from her Uncle Ezra crystallized the course of her adolescent life. This is the story as she tells it.

The year was 1900, and in Oberammergau, Germany, the famous Anton Lang was playing the Christ role in the Passion Play. Uncle Ezra, returning from a mission to the Sandwich Islands via Europe, wrote a long letter describing eloquently the amazing 8-hour spectacle in the outdoor theatre in that beautiful Bavarian village and the wonderful spirit existing there. He told of the origin of the play—the plague decimating the people and their prayer to God to save them, promising, if he would do this, to present a drama of the life of Jesus every ten years as a reminder to the townspeople. The plague ceased. Every ten years since, the inhabitants of Oberammergau have presented the story of the life of Jesus with the deepest reverence of their beings. Herr Lang hangs upon the cross for 20 minutes—a most difficult feat. All of the good characters try to match their lives in

righteousness to the lives of the men and women they portray. ("Mislaide" 14)

"I read it, touched to the heart. How wonderful it would be to see that," she whispered to herself. Then, a sudden hot surge of resolution rushed through her body. "I am going to see it. I am going to see the Passion Play in 1910. It only played every ten years" ("Mislaide" 14). The following Saturday, when her father gave her her weekly dime for a small treat, it went immediately into her savings bank, as did her dimes for the next ten years.

Ramona did see the Passion Play at Oberammergau in 1910 and joined her brother, Fred, who was serving an LDS mission in Germany, on a tour of Europe. She later commented:

Brothers and sisters can become so close to each other. I think I understand that better than most because of the wonderful months my brother Fred and I spent together, seeing the Passion Play and the lovely country in which it was given, with the neighboring terrain, and then Switzerland and Austria, Jugoslavia, and all we saw of the Balkans, Egypt, Greece, Turkey—and then our stay in Germany—seeing each other occasionally, he completing his mission, I a student at the University of Berlin. How close those experiences brought us." (Letter)

She stayed on in Berlin to complete an intensive one-year certificate in German language and literature at the Royal University. She had already graduated from the University of Utah in 1908 with a bachelor's degree in English literature, which she earned for her thesis on the "psychological development of George Eliot's characters in all her novels" (*Remembering*). She had also spent a year teaching English and history at the newly created high school in the country town of Heber while preparing a graduate paper on the philosopher Immanuel Kant.

But the trial of her intellectual abilities came in Berlin. Thanks to a helpful and influential professor at the Royal University, she was able to matriculate in the middle of the term. Unfortunately, he expected a favor in return. On her second day of classes, the professor asked her to

come in to talk over make-up work, which she did.

The professor was both obliging and business-like, but as I started to leave, he rose and a strange expression came over his face. He began to walk towards me. I apprehensively took a step backward. He kept coming towards me. Step by step I backed away until blocked by the hard surface of the wall. At that, he made a quick movement forward and I struck out with both hands. One, holding my handbag, hit his shoulder. I then gave him such a powerful push that he lost his balance and staggered. I ran from the room. I was sick with disappointment. I've ruined everything, I thought. Everything. All my plans.

I never dreamed that man would want to collect for his kindly help. The problem is, what to do now. The dear professor won't speak to me again and almost certainly he won't pass me in my classes. On my way home I decided to try to succeed so well in my school work that my teacher would not have the heart, nor the unprofessionalism, to fail me. Never had I put forth so much intellectual effort as began the next day. ("Berlin" 3-4)

As it turned out, the professor was impressed enough at the end of the course to publicly acknowledge her work in front of the class and recommended her to a German language translation company in New York.

It was also in Berlin that Ramona finally found her true friends. At the time, there were several other young Mormon women from Salt Lake studying music, philosophy and medicine there. One friend, Marion Cannon, lived nearby. "She was a serious student, who had learned to speak beautiful German and was a great reader of German novels and books about philosophy," recalled Ramona. "She had been studying piano for two years and, as a side line, singing for oratorios. She and I went to many plays, operas and concerts together. She was a genuine artist and highly intelligent, original and interesting in all her comments" ("Farewell" 15-16).

After returning to Salt Lake the following year to complete a master's degree in English literature, she met her best friend and future husband, the widower Joseph Cannon, when he asked her to serve on the planning committee for the Twenty-Fourth of July Parade. Together they chose a Greek theme for the float. Ramona then suggested that it would be very effective to use caryatids on each corner of the float. Joseph asked her, "How do you know about caryatids?" She responded, "Oh, I've read a little bit about Greek architecture. A caryatid is a great Greek figure, usually a woman, that stands with her hand like so holding an urn." Legend has it that Joseph was so impressed with her display of classical brilliance that he immediately began courting her. Ramona later commented that if "a young girl needs a good husband, tell her to remember the word 'caryatid' and use it when it's appropriate" (Excerpts).

Ramona admitted that she had previously been ambivalent about men and marriage; she had even imagined a successful and happy single life with a few adopted children. But she fell deeply in love with Joseph Cannon and wanted to marry him. "Both dreams," she acknowledged, "came true," for Joseph's three children were quickly incorporated into their own family" (Excerpts). They were married in 1914.

They moved their family to the remote city of Mompos, Colombia, where Joseph was involved in a livestock and timber investment enterprise with the fabled Jesse Knight. They lived there for three years, before the Mormon Church had any presence in South America, the only Americans in the city. "Large amounts of physical and intellectual energy and money were poured into the undertaking," she recalled. "But insuperable difficulties arose. It was a long struggle. We came home no richer than we had left, except for many adventuresome experiences" (Excerpts).

Back in Utah, Ramona came into her own as a writer and taught high school English. She had completed theses for both her bachelor's and master's degrees and published a number of articles and short stories as a single woman in her twenties, but now she embarked on an artistic avocation that she would pursue as a vocation after the

death of her husband. Her first series of articles for the *Children's Friend* drew on the experiences of her own children in Catholic Colombia. Many later stories about art, literature, and history for the *Instructor*, published by the Church's Deseret Sunday School Union, were also tailored to an adolescent audience. Through her own family, she came to appreciate the eager mind of youth. According to Rose Mary Pedersen, Ramona once reflected:

A mother can learn "twice as much" as a woman without children can and warned young women against deciding not to have children. Many will regret it later in life when it's too late to have them. No fulfillment can compare with that possible in motherhood. Those seeking fulfillment (through careers alone) are going about it in the wrong way. She said that many women can be "splendid mothers" while doing other things, too, but added that her fame [as a writer and journalist] never compared to her family experience. (Pedersen C-1, C-3).

Ramona was particularly concerned about the kind of mothers women should be. In an important article for the *Improvement Era*, she outlined the "inner dimensions" of parenting. "Fathers and mothers," she counseled, "should work together to keep the spiritual environment of the home at a high level. The spiritual dimensions of the child are so immeasurable that the impressions he receives in his early years may grow to incalculable proportions. Many a crisis in later life will be solved by the sum total of the child's spiritual experience" ("Inner Dimensions"). She was convinced that the whole soul of a child had to be nurtured and educated.

It followed, then, that her portraits of intellectual and artistic Mormon women in publications such as the *Relief Society Magazine* focused on those who did not sacrifice their homes for other accomplishments. Her sketch of Rose Homer Widtsoe, who held a Ph.D. from Berkeley in economics, is illustrative: "Rose and her husband Osborne had an exceptionally happy marriage [for] both were lovers of home, children, religion, and were fond of books, flowers and especially of each

other" ("Rose").

Having established this focus on the role of women as counselors and educators in the home, she championed the cause of women in every field. For thirty years, she authored the column, "Women's Sphere," for the *Relief Society Magazine*, highlighting female accomplishments in an unabrasive and exceptional manner. Here are three samples from this column between 1940 and 1970:

For the first time in history, a group to effect the advancement of women has met under the sponsorship of men and women, instead of women only. It is the Commission on the Status of Women, an outgrowth of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The goal of this organization is to provide for women a status equal to that of men in all fields of human enterprise—in political, social, and economic freedom; and in full personality development. Among others, women from China, Poland, India, South America, and Lebanon participated. (34.2)

The women of the Philippines are extraordinarily progressive. Usually the business managers in their households, they are often also joint managers with their husbands, of business enterprises. The percentage of women physicians, surgeons, dentists, pharmacists, lawyers, and professors is much higher than in the United States. In the College of Liberal Arts, University of the Philippines, thirty-five percent of the faculty are women—a three or four times higher percentage than in most co-educational institutions in the United States. Although it was 1937 before female suffrage came to the Philippines, two-fifths of the voters are women. (43.1)

Mrs. Maria Washburn, wife, mother, and homemaker, is a world famous physicist. She is a research specialist for Bausch and Lomb, Inc., on assignment to the department of biophysics and ophthalmic instruments (52.4)

After Joseph died, Ramona began her next career—as a family-advice columnist for the *Deseret*

News. She was sixty years old. Under the sobriquet of Mary Marker, she became a more intimate advocate of women in her column, "Confidentially Yours." She responded to the letters that came to her with wisdom collected from the reservoirs of her own experience. Though initially reluctant to accept the heavy task, she began to educate herself once more, this time in psychology and sociology, learning all she could about social work and mental health. She emerged in the end as a one-woman clearinghouse for the needy throughout the region. The following quotations reveal her sage advice and delightful sense of humor:

Man Insists Wife Stay Home

Dear Mary Marker: I have four little children and I love them very dearly. But I sometimes feel very resentful about my husband's attitude. He certainly believes that a woman's place is in the home—everlastingly in the home. And "everlastingly" gets to be too much. I have a good voice and used to sing in the choir and in choruses. I would love to sing again in such fine groups. It gave me inspiration to work through the week. The choir leader asked my husband recently, or rather said to him, they would like me to be in the choir and in a singing program in the ward. He told them they would have to wait—that I was much too busy with my family these days. We had a quarrel over this, but he hasn't changed his attitude. Don't you think I am right? Emm

Dear Emm: Indeed I do. Good normal mental health demands some recreation in life and a change of scene and of activity. Tell your husband that before he makes such an ultimatum for you you want him to shut himself up in his office for one week—not 52, only one—with his work piled around him every minute. Tell him that if he honestly feels, then, that any human being should live without any change and variety, you will consider trying to keep on staying home forever—though you won't be responsible for what happens to your personality. Children are too prone to regard Mother as nothing

but a household drudge, there to serve their needs. Early they should learn that sometimes THEY should serve her needs. Every mother needs some status in the eyes of her children and her neighbors and the community. She needs to be built up and dignified in her position as Mother of the Family. And it is the husband who can do this best. His attitudes toward her are very important. Your husband should make your children proud that you can sing. This should encourage them to develop their own talents. Busy, interested children don't get into much trouble, as a rule. Even if your husband should have to stay home with the children himself long enough to get acquainted with them, or hire a babysitter, you should have this opportunity to vary your own life and to give service to your church. (16 September 1959)

Whoa! You're Not In Love

Dear Mary: I am a returned missionary in love with four girls, and I don't know which one I love best. One is a beauty and bubbly, and always late. One is a fine student and always makes me think. One seems so wrapped up in me that it almost scares me, and she seems very religious. One has a tendency to be putting me in my place all the time. Sometimes this is amusing—sometimes it is anything but. Maybe I would succeed with a girl like that better than with a sweet—too sweet—one, however. How to find out which girl would be the best wife? Any suggestions? Confused

Dear Confused: Of course, you are not in love at all—yet. And maybe that is just as well. It takes a while to get re-oriented to life at home after two or more dateless years. You are a little like a child let loose in a candy or ice cream factory. Sometimes, too, a missionary seems to be especially eligible—just returned from many interesting and inspirational experiences. Yet perhaps the girl who gets excited about him might not find him the right husband for her.

So, take your time, both for your sake

and that of the girls. Don't go overboard. Falling in love isn't exactly a mathematical business, but it isn't a bad idea to draw some circles indicating certain qualities—mental, spiritual, physical—and see how many of these girls you would put in each circle. Write a list also of your own interests and see how the girls fit into that. Love in depth is a soul experience and usually grows somewhat slowly, or at least is discovered somewhat slowly. Sometimes this process of discovering new qualities in one's mate, with which to fall in love continues through a lifetime of marriage. These charts should be only guide lines to your heart. Heart and spirit and mind must all be fed in a marriage. Don't let physical attractiveness blind you to the more important matters. And some sweetness is very important. (19 April 1965)

Unselfish Love Could Solve Problems

Dear Readers: Christmas again—the “time of the dear Savior's birth” [and] after almost two thousand years, we, too, are still incapable of knowing Jesus thoroughly, of comprehending the depths of the principles He taught. If we could feel and practice the love He taught us, we would run very short of material for columns like “Confidentially Yours.” Most of the psychiatrists would be out of business too. Ah, yes, if only we could truly appreciate the dynamic power of LOVE with UNDERSTANDING! It is not only the creative principle of physical life, but of mental development, spiritual peace, all great achievement. True, deep, unselfish love would solve practically all our problems and would keep our families and society happy. (12 December 1956)

After continuing to produce these two columns into her eighties, she did admit that “monthly I expect a lettre de cachet from both of them—but as long as it doesn't come—I go on with them, though, to tell the truth, I am bone weary of both” (Excerpts). Perhaps at such moments of exhaustion, the German poem she once translated as a young aspiring academic in Berlin returned

from the recesses of her mind to offer her calm
comfort for a life well spent for others :

The hilltops high
Are at rest
'Mongst the trees not a sigh,
In thy breast
Peace enters anew
The birds in the woodland are still
Only a space until
Thou shalt rest too.
("Farewell" 4)

And perhaps such moments of weariness and
longing for rest were still the exception while her
zest for living was the rule. Ramona once com-
mented that Mormon women die, but they never
grow old. This was true in her own case. When
her family suggested that she use a cane to stabilize
her walk at age eighty-six, she consented to the
purchase and took two hours to choose just the
cane that would match her winter and summer
clothes and would give her the proper support.
Finally, she selected a handsome one that suited
her purposes. She promptly took it home and
hung it in her closet. When asked why she didn't
use it, she reported, "I will when I get a little
older. It will be there when I need it" (Excerpts).

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From Great Britain to the Great Salt Lake: The Poetry of Edward Lennox Sloan

David E. Sloan

Edward Lennox Sloan was born 9 November 1830, in Bangor, County Down, Ireland, to John and Mary Lennox Sloan. Edward Sloan received a common school training until the age of twelve, when he began to learn the trade of a weaver. Despite his lack of schooling, Sloan was well educated, having undertaken the responsibility for his own education. Although the exact date is uncertain, Edward Sloan joined the Mormon Church at about eighteen years of age. His zeal for the gospel took him on missions to Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales. During this time, he served in the presidencies of the Nottingham, Sheffield, and Liverpool conferences.

On 14 April 1853, Edward married Mary Wallace. They became the parents of ten children, only three of which survived beyond the age of fifteen years. In 1863, Sloan and his family emigrated to Utah and settled in Salt Lake City. In Salt Lake, Sloan married two more wives: Phoebe Watts, who gave birth to two children, and Emma Jones, who gave birth to three children.

Orson Whitney's *History of Utah* gives the following description of Edward Lennox Sloan: "A voracious reader, he devoured book after book of history, poetry, theology, etc., and his quick apprehension and thorough assimilation mastered readily any subject that interested him. So vivid, too, was the mental imprint, that in mature years he could repeat, word for word, without the slightest hesitation, long poems, and orations unconned by him since committing them to memory in his childhood" (623).

Sloan's self-training served him well. Much of his life was devoted to literary endeavors, including time spent as assistant editor of the *Millennial Star*, assistant editor of the *Deseret News*, editor of the *Salt Lake Telegraph*, and finally as editor and co-founder of the *Salt Lake Daily Herald*. In addition to these positions, he published the *Salt Lake*

Directory, founded *The Curtain*—a paper for the Salt Lake Theatre, and was instrumental in establishing the *Woman's Exponent*. Sloan also wrote a number of dramas, for example, "The Lily of the Seminoles," a play based on an Indian legend.

In 1854, at the age of twenty-three, Edward Sloan published his first poetry in Belfast, Ireland, a book entitled *The Bard's Offering*. In his preface, Sloan wrote: "When was there one who possessed the least spark of the divine fire of poetry who did not long for a share of fame? 'Tis enough that I wish for a place among the bards of my native land." He then gave the following challenge to his readers:

If the following pages are worthless—if they contain no sentiments worthy of your approbation . . . kind reader, cast them from you with contempt; let me know the worst at once, and bid me never again essay a single thought on paper. But if, on the contrary, you find any redeeming qualities shine forth . . . Oh! remember that the writer is young in years, almost uneducated, and one whose hand has been more used to the daily avocations of the labouring tradesman than wielding the pen, and cheer him onwards with your approbation. (i-ii)

The Bard's Offering appears to have been directed to a general audience of Sloan's fellow Irishmen. Its poems covers a wide range of subjects. Much of the poetry is religious in nature and reflects the influence of Mormon doctrine, although it does not deal specifically with events or figures in the Mormon Church, as does much of Sloan's poetry later published in the *Millennial Star*. Other poetry in the book is based on historical events, words for wise living, or even pure story-telling.

The Bard's Offering opens with "The Vision," a lengthy poem in which the poet sees the past,

present, and future of the "Emerald Island" (1-8). From the "pirate sea-kings of the north," to the "mighty Brian," Edward Sloan demonstrates his familiarity with the history of his native land. Of the pirates, Sloan writes:

Their war ships fiercely swept the coast
And devastation spread
They ravaged with an iron hand
And dyed their path with red.
And smoking hamlets soaked in blood.
And ruined cities lay.
With blackened walls and ghastly deaths,
Which marked the spoiler's way. (3)

Of the defending Brian, he writes:

And the mighty Brian waved his blade,
Unconquered in the fight—
His white locks streaming in the breeze—
A giant in his might. (4)

The vision then changes to the horrors of civil war:

The blood which flowed for freedom free.
As freely flowed in feud;
For brothers in the camp of late
Against each other stood. . . .
My soul recoiled and backward shrunk
At the ensanguined flood,
And horror sickened at the sight—
It was "The Isle of Blood." (4-5)

However, "The Vision" ends with hope for the future, as a comforting voice whispers in the poet's ear:

Mourn not, it said, though dark the page
That destiny spreads to view,
Nor sigh though fate hath freedom dimmed,
It yet shall glow anew. . . .
And prayers and praise shall scent the air,
Now burthened with their plaints.
And your own green island home shall yet
Be called "The Isle of Saints." (8)

These concluding lines of "The Vision" introduce a major theme underlying much of Sloan's poetry. This theme is that in spite of adversity and difficult times, one can still find peace, comfort, and hope in the world. In "The Vision," the poet hopes that Ireland will rid itself of war and bloodshed and will once again be known as the "Isle of Saints." In an 1858 poem, "Address to Erin," or Ireland, published in the *Millennial Star*, Sloan reveals the basis for his hope in the future of Ireland. For Edward Sloan, it is the message of the restored gospel which will again produce saints in Ireland:

Hark! a silver-toned call from the mansions of
glory
Proclaims to all people a heavenly story.

. . . .
Rejoice, rejoice! O Erin, verdant isle
Look up, and in the face of heaven smile.

. . . .
Rejoice! for now thy shores are blest and trod
By heaven's nobles, and by men of God.

. . . .
Praise God, ye few who bear the name of
Saint;
praise Him in song, in prayer, nor fear, nor
faint;
Offer the incense of a grateful heart
To those who bless you, ere from you they
part. (20.12 [20 March 1858]: 192)

These concluding lines, calling for praises to God in prayer and song, as well as the incense of a grateful heart, are strikingly similar to the concluding lines of "The Vision": "And prayers and praise shall scent the air"—bringing to mind a gospel substitute for the offering of incense.

The Bard's Offering also offers poetry in the form of story-telling, such as the tale of "Dermotte and Nora" (32-37). There is even poetry in a romantic vein, for example, "Meet Me Alone" (37-38), and, on a more personal level, a poem to Sloan's wife Mary from which these lines are taken:

When darkness gathers o'er my mind.

And sorrows wring my heart;
 When fancied demons lash my soul
 With keen, remorseless smart;
 When hope is dead
 And in its stead
 Despair assumes its reign;
 When Reason sleeps.
 And Passion steeps
 In frenzied fire my brain;
 'Tis Mary's voice can lull the storm
 That rages in my breast;
 Her words, like oil on troubled waves,
 Can hush my soul to rest;
 Before her eye
 The tempests fly,
 The clouds disperse their gloom,
 Hope buds anew
 With freshened hue.
 And flowers with richer bloom.

Once again, Sloan identifies a source of comfort in the midst of tribulation, in this case his wife Mary. The imagery is of one with the power to tame the elements. Mary's voice lulls the storm, her words are like oil on troubled waves, and her eye puts an end to tempests and disperses clouds.

Of all the poetry in *The Bard's Offering*, those poems which are religious in nature are most impressive. These include "Truth," "A Prayer" (28-29), "Eternity" (40-41), "Ode to Religion," and "The Judgment" (30-31). Consistent with the theme of peace in the midst of adversity, "Ode to Religion" praises the great comforting power of religion, a power that must have been a source of strength to help Edward and Mary Sloan through constant sickness and the loss of seven of their ten children, as these lines attest:

Priceless balm of consolation!
 Sweetest theme of sweetest song!
 In the hour of tribulation,
 Thine to aid us does belong.

....

Thine to smooth the dying pillow;
 Thine to blunt the sting of death—
 Lift us o'er the grave's dark billow,
 Mounting on triumphant faith.

Oh, my soul! be this thy refuge—
 This thy stay in trying hour;
 Though afflictions rain a deluge,
 Light shall fall the crushing shower.

The second stanza makes clear why religion can offer comfort despite affliction. Only after one possesses "triumphant faith" will the "sting of death" be blunted and the "dying pillow" be smoothed. It was Edward Sloan's faith that, in the end, justice would prevail and that the Saints of God would find rest in the heavenly kingdom.

This conviction is also evident in "A Prayer," which describes an erring but repentant individual returning to God's presence and obtaining an eternal reward:

Oh! Thou Almighty being, who reign'st
 Enthroned amid the sky.
 Before whose voice the earth shall fail.
 And starry heavens fly;

To Thee I kneel in earnest prayer.
 And bow before Thy throne;
 Grant me a thankful spirit, Lord.
 For countless favours shown.

I know, by Nature, Sin hath stamped
 Its image on my heart;
 Oh! wash away the guilty stain—
 Cleanse the polluted part.

Lead me to the eternal fount
 Of Thy Almighty grace.
 And with Thy finger on my heart
 Thy holy precepts trace.

...

And, when the mortal struggle's o'er,
 In Thy abounding love
 Give me a crown of glory in
 Thy own bright courts above. (28-29)

The faith in God's eternal justice and promised reward which is evident in "A Prayer" and other poems received its fullest expression in "The Judgment." Of all Edward Lennox Sloan's poems, "The Judgment" is probably the most unusual and

complex:

Hark! the last trump the great archangel
sounds
It rings its summons through space infinite;
All nature shivers to its utmost bounds;
Earth to its centre shakes, in dreadful fright;
The graves fly open wide; dust takes its flight
To meet with kindred dust; bone clings to
bone;
And forms, for ages disunite, unite,
Spring from the low caverns of death, and,
grown
Into full shape, mount up to meet the Judge's
throne.

....

High on a blazing throne, with Truth unfurled,
The Judge appears—the Lord of Life and
Light—
The scoffed—the scorned—the Saviour of the
world—
The crucified—now coming in His might;
The records of all ages, black as night;
The mighty book, unclosed, before Him lies;
Myriads of angels wheel their ceaseless flight
Around His throne, obedient to His eyes;
Glory and majesty surround Him through the
skies.

The heavens gather, like a shrivelled scroll,
And fly away; this ponderous massy ball—
This atom, where creation's planets roll—
Melts at His glance; dissolved to nought are
all;
Assembled billions down before Him fall,
And, guilty-stricken, view hell's rising smoke;
On liquid rocks and wasting hills they call
In vain to hide them, for commandments
broke;
The doom's pronounced—the Eternal's fiat
spoke.

The poor, the lowly, humble, meek of heart,
The trodden under-foot, despised of men,
Triumphant now receive their glorious part—
Thrones and bright crowns of glory without

end. (30-31).

Just as in "A Prayer," in which the poet asks
to be rewarded with a crown of glory in God's
bright courts above, in "The Judgment," the
faithful will triumph in the end and will also
receive thrones and bright crowns of glory. Ulti-
mately, for Edward Sloan, faith in this eternal
reward generates the comforting power of religion.

In addition to the theme of comfort in the
midst of adversity, another theme in *The Bard's
Offering* is that life is too short to be wasted and
that every moment counts. "Never Depend on
Tomorrow" and "Let Not the Morn Pass Idly By"
are examples of this second theme. The first stanza
of the latter poem reads as follows:

Let not the morn pass idly by—
The day with sloth grow old;
Note well the moments as they fly,
Each worth uncounted gold.
That brief, short space of time may prove
Your arbiter of fate;
A moment's act, a life may move.
And hosts of acts create.

Only entries covering a year and a half have
been preserved from Sloan's diary, but even these
selections show that the character traits praised in
"Never Depend on Tomorrow" and "Let Not the
Morn Pass Idly By" were also a part of his nature,
if this section of his journal is representative of the
rest of his life. He spent his time fulfilling numer-
ous responsibilities and improving his mind, even
though plagued by chronic health problems,
including severe chest pains and temporary facial
paralysis. This determination to succeed in the face
of adversity suggests another characteristic of
Edward Sloan, expressed in the poem "The Will
Will Find a Way":

I love the soul of purpose sure—
Strong, energetic in its plan;
Determined, patient to endure—
The very essence of a man;
Stedfast as truth, unchanged by years,
Expansive as the prairie's track,—

Not swayed by transient hopes nor fears,—
 The will to do, the way to act.
 Then give to me the lofty thought.
 Soaring 'yond fickle mortal's ken;
 The soul with noble feelings fraught,
 Unswerving from its purposed end.
 Though adverse blasts blow keenly chill,
 The wav'ring, timorous soul to sway,
 The firm, determined iron will
 Will never fail to find a way. (41-42)

After *The Bard's Offering*, the next major group of Edward Sloan's poems is in the *Millennial Star*, the LDS periodical in the British Isles. Sloan's poetry in the *Millennial Star* is directed toward a Mormon audience and includes some of his poetry previously published in *The Bard's Offering*. Sloan's poetry at this time deals expressly with the restored gospel and is very missionary oriented, as can be seen in "A Song for Scattered Israel" (1859), "Address to Erin" (1858), "The March of Truth" (19 [June 27, 1857]: 416), "A Gospel Song" (16 [3 June 1854]), and "Sinners, Awaken" (15 [10 December 1853]: 816). This latter poem begins:

Sinners, awaken! the Gospel is calling,
 Salvation is come to the children of men,
 The gifts of the Spirit in showers are falling,
 The voice of Jehovah is sounding again.
 For ages with darkness the world lay o'erclouded,
 The Church overwhelmed was hid from our sight:
 No longer in mists shall her glories be shrouded,
 For Truth's broken forth like an ocean of light.

Similar in language is "A Song for Scattered Israel":

Up, Israel! see how the powers rush
 Like maddened bulls to the fight:
 In the grasp of conflict they blindly crush
 Their valour, their strength, and might;
 The power and pomp of the despots fail.
 The might of the wicked is gone,
 And the honest in heart of the nations hail
 The bursting of Freedom's dawn.
 Then away, then away, to your posts with speed

Bid the Truth span earth and sea;
 For the hosts of the Lord shall with triumph speed
 In the coming jubilee. (21 [5 March 1859]: 164)

Both "Sinners Awaken" and "A Song for Scattered Israel" contain an urgent call for action. Both deal with the bursting forth of truth, which covers the earth like an ocean of light and also spans earth and sea. There is a sense of immediacy here, as if the poet has just watched the bursting of freedom's dawn—a very different sense than that which we have more than 160 years after the restoration.

One of the most interesting of Sloan's poems published in the *Millennial Star* is "On the Assassination of President Parley P. Pratt," written in Magherafelt, Ireland, in 1857. In the following excerpts from the eulogy to Parley P. Pratt, Sloan's firm belief in the ultimate justice of God is again evident:

Oh! mourn not his death, for a martyr he died,
 As the greedy earth drank up the pure crimson
 tide;
 And its deep cry for vengeance rang loudly on
 high,
 While the blood-stained assassin stood tauntingly
 nigh.

....

We have borne, we have suffered, till patience is
 fled,
 And the "cradle of freedom" taints strong of our
 dead:
 But an hour retributive swiftly draws nigh,
 When a just God's fierce arrows sure-pointed shall
 fly.

....

He is gone—driven off—by a thing spawned in
 hell.
 And eternity's records will show how he fell;
 But now joined with the holy ones passed off
 before,
 'Yond the veil he is working, and will evermore.

Soon the barriers of Death broken down for the
 just,
 And our brother beloved shall arise from the dust:

Then enthroned with immortals he'll God-soaring
go,
While his cowardly murderer writhes in his woe.
(21.31 [1 August 1857]: 496)

After he wrote the poetry published in the *Millennial Star*, most of Sloan's time was apparently spent in the capacity of editor rather than poet. However, some later poetry is found in the *Salt Lake Herald*, of which he was both co-founder and editor. According to *Voice in the West*, Wendell J. Ashton's biography of the *Deseret News*, the *Herald* arose as an opponent to the *Salt Lake Tribune*. Edward Sloan took this role of opponent seriously, and his pointed writing was sometimes offensive to those to whom it was directed. One writer from the Associated Press was so upset over one of Sloan's articles that he entered the *Herald* office brandishing a pistol and demanding a retraction. Fortunately, the pistol was wrestled away without anyone being injured (*History of Utah*, 623).

However, the *Herald* still had room for cultural refinement. The front page, top center, of the *Herald* was reserved for poetry, which appeared every few days in the paper. The works of both national and local poets appeared in the column. Although research has not uncovered any poetry in the *Herald* credited to Edward Sloan, he may have written a number of anonymously published poems. Many of these poems deal with social or political issues of the time. For example, two poems published in February 1871 deal with the issue of woman's role in society: "A Woman's Song to Woman" (26 Feb. 1871, 1) and "A Wife of the Period" (2 Feb. 1871, 1).

It seems reasonable that Sloan wrote both because, only a few months later, he asked Louisa Greene Richards if she would be interested in editing a paper for Mormon women. Sloan discovered Louisa when, in need of money, she submitted a number of poems to the *Herald*, for which she received \$7.50 (Sherilyn Cox Bennion, *Equal to the Occasion*, 159-61). Arrangements were made and the *Woman's Exponent* began, the first issues being printed at the *Herald* plant. Three years later, at Edward Lennox Sloan's death in

1874, the *Woman's Exponent* editorialized: "He was an able journalist, and the *Exponent* had, perhaps, no other friend whose influence was more unsparingly used in its behalf at the time of its commencement, than was that of Mr. Sloan."

Also published in the *Herald* was an unsigned poem entitled "Since Mary Was a Lassie" (1870), reminiscent of the poem "To Mary," published in "The Bard's Offering." It reads in part:

You'd hardly think that patient face,
That looks so thin and faded,
Was once the very sweetest one
That ever bonnet shaded.
But when I went through yonder lane,
That looks so still and grassy,
Those eyes were bright, those cheeks were fair,
When Mary was a lassie.

But many a tender sorrow,
And many a patient care,
Have made those furrows on the face,
That used to be so fair.
Four times to yonder churchyard,
Through the lane so still and grassy,
We've borne and laid away our dead,
Since Mary was a lassie.

And so, you see, I've grown to love
Those wrinkles more than roses;
Earth's winter flowers are sweeter, far,
Than all spring's dewy posies.
They'll carry us through yonder lane
That looks so still and grassy,
Adown the lane I used to go,
When Mary was a lassie.

Mary's sorrows were not at an end. On 2 August 1874, just three years after founding the *Herald*, Edward Lennox Sloan died at age forty-three. Although his life was short, Edward Sloan would not have considered his early death a tragedy. He lived life to its fullest, making the most of each day and "never depending on tomorrow." He did this despite constant trials and sickness, relying on his "firm, determined, iron will" to help him

succeed. Throughout his life, he found peace because of his deep religious faith in God's justice and the promised reward of a glorious crown in God's bright courts above. Edward Sloan's poetry was a sincere expression of these deeply felt beliefs.

Perhaps the most fitting conclusion to a discussion of the poetry and life of Edward Sloan is to read one of his own poems, printed in the *Woman's Exponent* upon his death and engraved upon a pioneer monument at Winter Quarters, Nebraska:

Mourn not for those who peaceful lay
Their wearied bodies down,
Who leave this frail and mortal clay
To seek a fadeless crown.

Dry up the unavailing tear,
Repress the selfish sigh.
Know that the spirit ransomed here
Yet lives and ne'er shall die.

DAVID E. SLOAN is an attorney in Salt Lake City and a descendant of Edward Lennox Sloan. Photocopies of the poems cited in this paper are in his possession. This paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, 26 January 1991 at Westminster College, Salt Lake City.

Eros in LDS Life and Literature:
A Panel with B. W. Jorgensen,
Margaret Blair Young, and Karin Anderson England

The Song of Songs and the
Mormon Blues
B. W. Jorgensen

I do want to present myself today as a reader and a writer, sometimes that professional kind of reader known as a literary critic. The AML Board invited me some time ago to consider chairing a panel on "Sex and Love in Mormon Literature," and I wondered if I was thought to be some sort of expert. There is no question that I'm interested, and that's been clear in some of my publications. (See biographical note.) Two of my stories draw on the Song of Solomon—"Who Jane, Who Tarzan" quite consciously, and "A Song for One Still Voice" unconsciously, although as I've looked back, I've noticed that it was always there.

I've sometimes been asked about how a Mormon writer can "appropriately" write about sex. The sex I want to write about is marital. I've started but never got very far, but I'm interested in how couples relate. I want to write Mormon domestic comedy—I hope it's not tragedy! The writers I've been reading and hope to learn from include Josephine Humphreys, Reynolds Price, Rosellen Brown, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, and Frederick Busch. (See Works Cited.) I've got a lot of catching up to do, reading fiction that would help me learn to write well about love and marriage. I go on regretting my own stupidity for not reading *Jane Eyre* until age forty-four (when I assigned it in a course) because it was a "girls' book."

When this topic comes up, there are no disinterested or uninterested parties, and if you're Mormon, that includes God. I suspect that all of us are "expert," in the root sense of this word, having had "experience" of the topic. A discussion

on this topic ought to range into biology, culture, history—it should not be a merely literary discussion. But literature is where we will begin.

As a writer and a reader, a critic, and a teacher of reading, writing, and criticism, it has seemed to me that I and other Mormon readers and writers feel ourselves under a prohibition, or stigmatized, when our texts touch on what Greek romances call *erotika pathemata*¹—incidents of love, love-sufferings, the sorrows or joys of Eros. The prohibitions on reading the discourse of Eros—the story that Eros makes in our lives—are explicit and often apostolic and thus have to be taken quite seriously.

In 1994, I taught Sunday School Course 15 on alternate weeks, and the manual included a statement made in 1974 by a prominent Church member who was not then but is now an apostle:

For your own good, avoid it ["the promotional literature of illicit sexual relations"]. Pornographic or erotic stories and pictures are worse than polluted food . . . [because] this marvelous retrieval system we call a brain . . . won't vomit back filth. Once recorded, it will always remain subject to recall, flashing its perverted images across your mind and drawing you away from the wholesome things of life.² (Oaks 53-54)

I discussed the "poison" metaphor in 1986 ("Groping" 129-30, 133) although I hadn't, at that time, seen this statement and its very interesting shift to a computer-memory metaphor or what now sounds like CD-ROM, and apparently CD-ROM with a power of its own—it doesn't have to be addressed. Even so brief a statement contains more complexities than I can readily deal with here. It conflates "pornographic" and "erotic" in a way that I would not want to. Its association of both of those with "illicit sexual relations" (a valid inference from the etymology of "pornography" but too narrow for "erotic") and its implicit

exclusion of the erotic from "the wholesome things of life" are likewise problematic. The statement speaks of "your mind" (but not "my mind?"), and at one point makes remembered "filth" passive to will ("subject to recall") and at another seems to give it an exhibitionist ("flashing") will of its own, or perhaps it is only the "perverted images" which have this power. The longer I look at this statement, the more puzzling its assumptions become, though its monitory and prohibitive intentions remain perfectly clear. (I hope it's also clear that, speaking here as a scribe, as I always do, and not as one having authority, I mean to speak as much as I can, as scribes prefer, of texts and not of persons. I don't want to make criticisms of any person, but I will criticize texts.)

I think the implicit prohibition or stigma on Mormon writers who try to write about sex comes up in my own writing group; for instance, when my wife asks, with some humor but with "real intent" (as the scriptures say), referring to all the male members in the group, "Why do you boys have to write about sex all the time?" Well, we don't, all the time. She says, "It's like you're trying to outdo each other." I don't think we are; but she feels that way, if and when we do. Or the sense of a prohibition is there if I overhear a colleague utter a version of the same question, wondering why so many so-called serious Mormon writers seem "obsessed" (I don't think they are) with writing about sex. I think it's a good question, worth addressing, and I hope that this panel addresses it to some extent.

Yet I find myself much more exercised by the questions of *how* we write and read about sex. It seems to me that in fact we don't read the erotic very well. Maybe we can't read it, we're blinded to it, or blinded by it, or deafened, and maybe there are good reasons for that; but as I've said, there are no disinterested or uninterested parties. All of us, men and women, bear the stigmata of sex, its literal marks on our bodies, its powers in our souls, from birth, or from before birth, to death and beyond; it may behoove us, then, to learn to read the stories and the songs of Eros as well as we can. Being human it's hard to avoid this; and believing in a God who has sex, who begot us in

spirit in some way like the way our mortal and sexed bodies are begotten, we may fail to learn some of what we are here to learn if we do not learn to read the texts of Eros. We are, in my awareness, the only Christians, the only western monotheists (if we are monotheists), who take radically seriously the idea that God is male and a father, which means that he has a female partner, and that they thus had sex to beget us as children. We do not talk metaphor when we say "God the Father."

"Mormon Blues" is the title for an essay I conceived fifteen years ago but have never written. By "Mormon Blues," I meant generally our troubles with sexuality and more specifically a certain faint, thin, high humming or keening that I thought I kept hearing in the music of a lot of Mormon marriages, including my own. "The blues ain't nothin' but a good man [or woman] feelin' bad," I've heard tell. And I really love what Woodie Guthrie said about the blues:

Well, the blues. I always just call plain old bein' lonesome, thinkin' that you're down and out, disgusted and busted and can't be trusted, gives you a lonesome feeling that the world's sort of turned against you or there's something about it you just don't understand.

... Bein' lonesome. (qtd. in Silverman 5)

I was wondering, when I added "The Song of Songs *and*" to the title, whether Solomon's rapturous canticles might offer any useful wisdom, though now I also wonder if the Song of Solomon might also sing the Mormon and the human blues. That's where I'm coming from.

I have thought that the place to start a literary discussion of this topic would be within the scriptures, the sacred texts, particularly the Song of Solomon, which is unfortunately a problematic text. Around the first century C.E., the great Rabbi Akiba, whom Harold Bloom calls "the dominant single figure in the entire history of normative Judaism" (1) warned that "he who sings the Song of Solomon in wine taverns [or in banquet houses or symposia], treating it as if it were a vulgar song, forfeits his share in the world to come" (qtd. in Phipps 8). But that was because Akiba held that "the whole world is not worth the

come" (qtd. in Phipps 8). But that was because Akiba held that "the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (qtd. in Pope 19). He's also reported elsewhere to have said, "Had not the Torah been given, the Canticles would have sufficed to guide the world" (qtd. in Pope 19). That's stunning. In the Hebrew Bible, "the Song is placed among the Writings . . . , following Job," and it is to be read in the synagogue "on the eighth day of Passover" (Pope 18). (I wish I knew more about what that would signify.) The massive commentary by Marvin Pope in the Anchor Bible series, seven hundred pages long, says: "In proportion to its size [it's the second shortest book of the Bible], no book of the Bible has received so much attention and certainly none has had so many divergent interpretations imposed upon its every word" (89). It "was probably the most popular scriptural book for medieval Jews" (Phipps 9)—which could of course only demonstrate how apostate *they* were; but I wouldn't want to jump to that conclusion too quickly.

Christians rescued themselves from "the acute embarrassment of having to explain a book that seemed to praise passionate sexual activity, which was generally believed to be the root of much evil," by means of allegory (Phipps 10) of a strongly Platonistic sort, denying the literal fleshly sense of the text while asserting a "spiritual sense" (Phipps 11). So the Song "came to be reckoned one of the most important books by sexually ascetic Christians"; according to Jean LeClercq, a historian of monasticism, it was "the book which was most read and most frequently commented on in the medieval cloister" (Phipps 10). Well, of course.

The Christian tradition of commentary begins with Hippolytus around the second century, but most importantly with Origen around the third century. He wrote a ten-volume commentary which is now "only in a small part extant" and warned in his prologue to that commentary that "everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature should refrain from

reading this book" (qtd. in Phipps 11). Origen, of course, had dealt with the problem in his own case earlier in his life by taking quite literally Jesus' injunction to cut off the offending member of the body (Phipps 11), and thus made himself the ancestor of Levi Peterson's self-castrating character, Jeremy Windham, in *The Backslider*. So perhaps it became a little easier for Origen to read the Song allegorically "as a purely spiritual drama of the inner life" (Phipps 11). I'm a little mean to Origen there, I'm sure, but that's the story.

Christian commentary just goes on and on in that allegorical vein, Catholic and Protestant, down to very near our own time. Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, wrote eighty-six sermons on the Song, spent the last eighteen years of his life working on it, and died before he finished chapter 2 (Pope 123). He was "averaging more than two sermons per verse for the first two chapters" (Phipps 13). Bernard said, "When you think of these two lovers, not a man and a woman are to be thought of but the Word of God [that is, Christ] and the soul" (qtd. in Phipps 14; cf. Pope 123, citing Sermon 61). The story is told by Bernard's contemporary and biographer, William of St. Thierry, that in youth he "once exchanged admiring glances with a girl and experienced an erection which so perturbed him that he dunked himself in an icy pond until the tumescence subsided and there and then he resolved to become a monk" (Pope 123).

Well, taking the Song of Solomon literally, rather than allegorically, has been a dangerous thing, historically speaking. Back in the fourth and fifth centuries, Jovinian, a monk in the Latin Church, and a cleric by the name of Theodore of Mopsuestia in the Greek Church, both had advocated the literal sense of the text. Jovinian held "that the Song is full of the idea that marital sexuality is hallowed" (Phipps 18; cf. Pope 120), and he thus brought down the wrath of St. Jerome on him, who insisted "that the true meaning of the Song is diametrically opposite to the literal meaning"; both Ambrose of Milan and Pope Siricus condemned Jovinian, in councils in Milan and Rome in 395 and 390 respectively, for heresy and blasphemy (Phipps 18; Pope 120). That was the end of that. Theodore's beliefs that sexual desire

was not inherently impure and that even Jesus had some fleshly impulses were far “too radical for his ascetic milieu”; and in 550 or 553, about a century after his death, the Council of Constantinople condemned his interpretation and anathematized him; his commentary does not survive (Phipps 19; Pope 119). Maybe a little surprisingly, John Calvin and Martin Luther condemned the Church Fathers’ habit of biblical allegoresis, but not without compunction when it came to the Song (Phipps 17, 19-21; Pope 126).

The persistent debate over allegorical and literal interpretation of the Song might almost reinscribe the conflict (as traditional Christianity understood it) of flesh and spirit, or conflicts between opposed theological assumptions; certainly such conflicts have historically entangled the hermeneutics of the Song. William Phipps sees Bernard’s “repressed erotic urges result[ing] in a flood of dark passion in later life” (14). Cistercians would likely demur on all this, but I find Phipps rather intriguing if not persuasive, in seeing Bernard’s “antipathy toward Peter Abelard” as being “in large part due to a different assessment of human love,” of which Abelard had had more experience than Bernard:

Abelard believed that natural urges were not sinful due to having inherited contaminated sexuality from Adam’s fall. . . . “If cohabitation with a wife and the enjoyment of pleasant things were allowed us in Paradise from the first day of our creation without guilt being incurred, who may argue that these things are now sinful, provided only that we do not exceed the limits of our permission?” (Phipps 14)

“Outraged by Abelard’s criticism of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin,” and “motivated as much,” perhaps, by Abelard’s notorious “love life,” Bernard “requested Pope Innocent to exterminate the ‘fox destroying the Lord’s vineyard’” (Phipps 14; Pope 123)—interestingly expropriating a line from the Song of Solomon itself and rewriting it in a more violent allegorical mode. (The text of Song 2:15 simply urges to “take” or “capture” the little foxes that spoil the vines with tender grapes.) Bernard succeeded in getting Abelard excommuni-

cated and his books burned, but he seems to have been unsatisfied with that punishment. He holds in Sermon 66 on the Canticles that “heretics should be put to death” (Pope 123).

Peter the Venerable, who “interceded on behalf of Abelard, and gained permission for him to spend the rest of his days at Cluny where he read, prayed, and kept silent” (Pope 123), chided Bernard: “You perform all the difficult religious duties; you fast, you watch, you suffer; but you will not endure the easy ones—you do not love” (qtd. in Phipps 15). Arthur McGiffert writes, “For all his praise of love”—and there’s nothing greater than those eighty-six sermons—“he was a violent hater” (qtd. in Phipps 15). Bernard wrote that enemies should be thought of “not as almost nothing but as nothing at all” (Sermon 50 qtd. in Pope 123); and in calling for the second crusade in his Letter to the Bavarians he claimed that “the living God has charged me to proclaim that he will take vengeance upon such as refuse to defend him against his foes. To arms, then! . . . and let the cry of Jeremiah reverberate through Christendom: ‘Cursed be he that withholdeth his sword from blood’” (qtd. in Phipps 15; cf. Pope 124). Due to his age, Bernard “declined the honor” of serving as commander-in-chief of that crusade. William Phipps remarks, “‘Make war, not love,’ might have been an appropriate slogan for that saint!” (16). Yet Bernard, as he admits, “has been singled out by some as one of the most Christlike persons in Church history” (16).

Well, that suggests some of the intellectual and personal complexities that surround the Song of Solomon historically. The story of Bernard and Abelard seems almost a fable for our own times. There’s an enormous mountain of commentary, most of it allegorical, down to the present. Some of the most literal commentary in our own time may seem a little silly. Joseph Dillow, a recent Protestant writer on the literal side, calls his book on the Song *Solomon on Sex* and seems to take the Song as God’s own marriage manual. It’s actually not a bad idea, even if it sounds a little silly; but I wouldn’t go quite that far until I learn a little more about the text. Two presumably LDS readers, by the way, of the copy in the Harold B. Lee

Library, if we can go just by their marginalia, have taken opposed views of this man's reading. Dillow at one point quotes "the fragrance of your garments" (Song 4:11) and remarks that the verse "apparently refers to a flimsy, scant, and perfumed negligee" that partly reveals the bride's breasts (4:5) and her "mountain of myrrh" (4:6). He comments, "Shulamith knew how to dress for bed!" (Dillow 81). One reader has rather dourly written in the margin, "Where do you get this?" (Seems to me it's clear where it comes from.) Another has responded in slightly sloppier handwriting, "Don't be such a prude, pal. Enjoy sex!" That's another bit of documentary evidence for the Mormon blues.

Against all this spiced mountain of traditional Jewish and Christian commentary, which we can, if we wish, dismiss as so much apostate fiddling with an uninspired text, of disputed canonicity, there is, as far as I know, no Mormon tradition of commentary at all. The visible evidence of that absence, of what we might take as a sort of "official" Church position on the Song, is in the current LDS editions of the scriptures, and it's interesting and instructive to ponder that evidence briefly.

The current LDS edition—if I count accurately, and I'm counting separate references within individual footnotes—has about twenty annotations for the entire Song: two cross-references to other biblical texts, one of them the obvious reference to 1 Kings 4:32, which summarizes Solomon's literary accomplishments, and the other cross-referencing 2:12, "the voice of the turtle," to Jeremiah 8:7; seven cross-references to other parts of the Song itself, including some multiples between chapter 4 and chapter 5; eight explanations or alternate translations of idioms such as "henna" or "gazelle" and particularly "my sister, my spouse," which is explained as an idiom to express tenderness (as if we couldn't figure that out); two references to the Topical Guide: 2:12, about the flowers appearing and the voice of the turtle, referenced to "TG Nature," and 8:6, which says that "jealousy is cruel as the grave," to "TG Cruelty," overlooking that this line is a questionable Jacobean translation of something that might be

rendered as "passion is fierce as hell." And that's it. Except for Nature and Cruelty, the Song is not, as far as I know, cited in the Topical Guide—under the topics I've checked, particularly not under "Sexual Immorality" or "Lust," which is something to be thankful for, but also not under "Marriage," and that's something to regret.

The chapter heads or glosses seem to have been written with half-averted eyes. For chapter 1 the gloss reads, "He sings of love and devotion," though the chapter begins, "Let him kiss me . . ." You blink. Obviously that gloss "he" refers to the putative author, Solomon, and not to the first voice to sing in the Song. It's not only jarring, it's more: an implicit denial of the song's dominant *female* voice, though she does get included in "their" and "they" later. The heads for chapters 5, 6, and 7 read, "Their song of love and affection continues," and "They still sing of love" and "Their song of love continues." That's your interpretive help; you're really on your own here, brother and sister, and good luck.

For a contrast, the Bible that I was given in my teens with a set of LDS "Ready References" bound into the middle and a little "Concise Encyclopedia" abridged from the Cambridge Companion bound into the back just before the Concordance, "specially bound for" the LDS Church and distributed by Deseret Book—so it's a quasi-LDS Bible—has (again, if I count accurately, and I'm counting in the same way) about eighteen annotations for the first chapter alone: seven cross-references to other texts in the Bible, including of course 1 Kings, but also Ecclesiastes, Ezekiel, Psalms, Mark, Isaiah; five cross-references from that chapter to other parts of the Song itself; six explanations or alternate translations of idioms in that chapter. There's no topical guide in this edition, though the little "encyclopedia" in the back includes a half-column summary of the Song, interpreting it as a story about Solomon and the Shulamite and her fidelity to her shepherd swain (one of the admittedly dubious attempts to make narrative/dramatic sense of the Song). The page-header glosses in this edition all refer allegorically to the mutual love of Christ and the Church; so there's not much help there, and the allegorist, for

(Green) to get much farther.

The most interesting, provocative, and helpful, yet of course most controversial annotation in this older quasi-LDS edition cross-references Song 8:6, "love is strong as death," to Romans 8:35, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"—obviously an allegorical cross-reference, which is, as you'll remember, the inception of Paul's most beautiful, soaring, astonishing, and consoling paean to God's steadfast love of his people: a text for all times, and maybe especially for times like ours when so much threatens to separate us from that love, our own willful wanderings most of all.

The most notable note in the post-1979 LDS edition, just below the one for 1:1, reads: "NOTE: the JST mss states that 'The Songs of Solomon are not inspired writings.'" This marginal note, which heretofore has not had canonical status but something like Midrashic or Patristic status, now attains something like canonical status, and at the same time marginalizes the text it comments on. We still have the Song in our Bibles, but now this note is telling us it's not inspired. Maybe that leaves us free to just read it and not worry about it.

I would say that for Latter-day Saints the Song has become a quarantined text, perhaps no longer a sacred text. Its retention is entailed by our commitment to the Authorized or King James Version, but its binding threads to the rest of the sacred scripture have largely been severed. It's a text stapled shut, as I heard a former missionary say *he'd* heard was the case with the copy owned by a recent President of the Church. (Bert Wilson, by the way, my folklorist friend, suspects that this is not true, just missionary folklore, a suspicion I'm inclined to share. And in current LDS editions, stapling would still leave far too much of the Song legible.)

But it's a leaky quarantine; or to take my other metaphor, some of those threads don't sever easily. For one thing, there are three direct allusions to Song 6:10, "Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?"³ in Doctrine and Covenants 5:14, 105:31, and 109:73. So apparently the Lord thought well enough of the

Song—or at least that verse—to "quote" it in modern revelation; and the uses all apply, we might say, allegorically to the Restored Church. They vary according to context. The first, given at Harmony, Pennsylvania, in March 1829 (not in the 1833 *Book of Commandments* but added in 1835), proclaims "the beginning of the rising up and coming forth of my church out of the wilderness"—the Church which is to be formally organized within only weeks of this particular prophetic word. The second, given amidst Zion's Camp, on Fishing River, Missouri, on 22 June 1834 (which is at or near the summer solstice, by the way, to speak of "clear as the sun"), is given in the midst of mob violence against the Church, and it makes an understandable militaristic expansion of the Song's text: "But first let my army become very great, and let it be sanctified before me, that it may become fair as the sun, and clear as the moon, and that her banners may be terrible unto all nations. . . ." The third, embedded in the climactic petition of the revealed dedicatory prayer for the Kirtland Temple, 27 March 1836, again takes up the 1829 theme (and by the way, both the 1829 and 1836 usages occur somewhere near Passover season; I don't know what to make of that, it may be purely an accident): "That thy church may come forth out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon," etc. But this time it expands that quotation in the direction of the apocalyptic sacred marriage of Christ the bridegroom and the Church his bride, "adorned . . . for that day when thou [God] shalt unveil the heavens and cause the mountains to flow down at thy presence. . . ." It actually goes on for several verses in that expansion. Here God seems to have made central a portion of the text that his church—at his bidding, we must suppose—seems now to make marginal.

I suspect we might find other, less hugely audible echoes of the Song elsewhere in Christian and modern scripture. What of Revelation 3:20, for instance—"Behold, I stand at the door and knock," to which my old Bible cross-referenced Song 5:2? Or is there a rewriting and application, as we might call it, partly by way of Romans 8:35-39, of the Song's climactic "love is strong as

as we might call it, partly by way of Romans 8:35-39, of the Song's climactic "love is strong as death" at the climax of Doctrine and Covenants 121?—"then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reprov'd, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy; That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death" (43-44).

We have tried to silence and marginalize a text that sounds as though it will not stay silent, that will insist on binding itself to the core of our faith, hope, and love. Love will not be stilled.

William Phipps, in his essay on the Song, quotes Jeremiah: "The voice of bridegroom, the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing" (6). This list sounds like a *dramatis personae* for the Song. I can't find that identical phrasing in my Authorized Version but I do find this, which sounds like a prophecy whose fulfillment we are now living, both textually and maritally: "Then will I cause to cease from the cities of Judah, and from the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of mirth, and the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride; for the land shall be desolate" (7:34; cf. 16:9, 15:10). I'm citing that out of context, too, and we don't know why the Lord says he's going to do that, but I think we've been silencing those voices in marginalizing the Song of Solomon, driving them out into the wilderness, and our brides and bridegrooms don't sing songs of mirth for long.

Which brings me back to the Mormon blues. According to Doctrine and Covenants 88:15: "The spirit and the body are the soul of man." One of the things this means to me is that we must be very careful about our language whenever we speak of the body, not to treat it as secondary, as somehow less than the spirit. The spirit *and* the body are the soul. (I am aware that Doctrine and Covenants 101:37 warns us to "care not for the body, neither the life of the body; but care for the soul, and for the life of the soul"; but if "soul" means "spirit *and* body," this must mean to care not for the body alone, but for body-and-spirit *as* soul.) When the female voice in the Song of Solomon sings, "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth," the Hebrew word *nephesh* may

not mean precisely what the Mormon word "soul" is supposed to mean, but it does mean something rather large; Pope says it "designates the person or self including all its appetites and desires, physical and spiritual" (328; cf. 525).

Our ordinary and casual language about these things seems to me to be frighteningly reductive. When I hear the expressions, "Oh, that's just sex," "mere sex," or "sex is just fleshly desire," or "just physical desire," I wonder how a person can say that. For the Greeks, *eros* did not mean simply (though it normally included) sexual desire; it meant a desire for and a delight in the entire presence of the beloved. They had another word for specifically genital desire and pleasure, which could occur without *eros*: *ta aphrodisia*, cognate with Aphrodite or aphrodisiac. *Eros* meant something larger.⁴

In our century, Freud wanted it to mean something larger. He needed a term larger than "sexual instinct" and he landed on *Eros*. He revived one of the most ancient gods of all, according to Hesiod (*Theogony* 116-22),⁵ to try to talk about the power "uniting and binding" everything from the cells of living matter to civilization itself.⁶ Late in his career, Freud constructed a sort of minimalist, two-character mythology: *Eros* and *Death*. Those are the powers in his atheist mythology.

So it troubles me when someone says, "That's just skin on skin." I'm shocked and appalled. How can anyone who has begun to know another person sexually—and as soon as I use the adverb, I'm introducing the reductive term—say such a thing as that? We're talking about the soul, not about the "mere" body. I think Mormon scripture warns us not to talk like that. God died and rose again for the sake of our bodies, that is, our souls, for "the resurrection from the dead is the redemption of the soul" (D&C 88:16). I think we simply must, for mortal and eternal reasons, try to approach, carefully, reverently, but as honestly as we can, the discourse of *Eros*—or sex—within our culture.

Narrative, Community, and Intimacy

Karin Anderson England

I am just finishing a one-year leave from full-time teaching after the birth of our third child. The break came all at once after a very difficult season of pregnancy, teaching, and raising small children. This year has been a time to talk and think and reassess, for Mark and me to catch our breath and ponder ourselves as the spouses and parents we have become. I have begun to realize how much I have learned without taking time to gain perspective.

Take sex, for example. Mark and I lay awake last summer laughing about the awful dates we suffered, the things we didn't know, the erotic forays we could not measure for lack of information. We laughed at ourselves and each other, still new enough in our "adulthood" to savor the novelty of being on the inside track.

Although the conversation was originally amusing, I found myself thinking beyond the humor over the next few weeks. It occurred to me that, although I am constantly assessing my own and others' experiences as future writing material, I had never consciously considered my own history of sexual encounters as a whole. This surprised me. And when I did start to write, I realized that there were stronger emotions and a wider range of experiences than I would have casually recalled. In short, I had never tried to assess the range of influences that informed the erotic elements of my personality. I had never adequately acknowledged that there were such elements in me. As a result, I was further away from understanding the entirety of myself, my culture, and my marriage than I could have been. Writing a segment of "Near-Sex Experiences" (*Dialogue*, Fall 1995) that deals briefly with sexual attitudes in my hometown, for example, was more revealing to me than it should have been at this stage of my life.

FROM "NEAR SEX EXPERIENCES: CONFESSIONS OF A MORMON GIRL"

Five years into marriage, I am just beginning to understand how much baggage we bring, virgin

or no, into a long-term sexual relationship. I thought I was coming into marriage with a fairly light load, but an honest inventory suggests otherwise. I will probably never understand the full weight I drag. So maybe I didn't inherit an enormous sex-guilt connection from my parents. I did take on their attitude that making a bigger deal of anything than absolutely necessary is despicable. Besides skiing, despising the fanatical is my family's one fanaticism. That's a big trunk, heavy enough to pull around on wheels, and there's plenty of sexual paraphernalia locked, maybe irretrievably, inside.

I picked up plenty of carry-ons from growing up in a small, strictly Mormon community. We're not all as crazy as old Jacob Guttman, but his kind does tend to trail us around. I remember Jacob standing up in church and pounding his fist on the pulpit: "The women is long in the hair and short in the brains! The man is to guide and control the woman! Do not fall for the temptations of the woman! And children—Santa Claus is a dirty lie!"

When I was just old enough to comprehend her story, I recall Jacob's wife Clara telling us in testimony meeting, in an accent as thick as her husband's although she had been born and raised in Alpine just like my Grandma, about a fateful night in their family history. She had dreamed of a beautiful baby boy (they had six daughters and only two sons) who had spoken to her, even though he was only an infant. He told her to wake his daddy up quick because he was chosen to come to their family. This was serious business with a couple who never wallowed in filthy intercourse unless they were fairly certain it would result in offspring, lust's sole justification. Trembling, Clara woke her husband, who, surprised into action, lost control too soon.

"And he spilled the seed on the sheets!" Clara wailed. "It was all spilled! And we lost the beautiful baby boy!"

Jacob sat upright, pale and chastened. I personally was relieved, unwilling to welcome another Guttman boy to the neighborhood, mean as his brothers were. My sister and I later wondered together how much "seed" had been spilled

I carry Mace in my baggage, although I can never find it when I need it, to ward off potential sex fiends. I learned young that you never know who will turn out to be one. Like LaMar Warnock, a frail quiet guy, the last you'd ever suspect. But in Alpine, we know better, because my uncle and his pals when they were thirteen were wandering through LaMar's apple orchard with nothing to do but break the padlock on his shed. They discovered a trove of *Playboy* magazines, so many that they didn't guess he'd miss a few. They each took some home, traded them back and forth until somebody's parents found out. Boy, was LaMar in trouble! He had to go see the bishop, who made him go to each kid and his parents and apologize. No wonder I don't trust men. I don't even know who not to trust.

I even carry saddlebags. When I was fourteen, I rode with my dad in the pickup to take our mare to be bred. We eased her backward out of the trailer, I led her to an empty stall, then I followed my father and Bill Mildens through the stables to see the high-blue-eyed stallion they had chosen to sire the colt. He reared and whinnied at our approach, so hot and wild he seemed to be throwing off sparks. He made my pulse leap, my legs weak. I wanted to stay and watch, but Mildens said, "I don't think that's the kind of thing a young lady would really want to see." I felt the blood rush to my face. I'd seen horses do it before; the big mare and the skinny no-breed stallion in the pasture by the elementary school were always at it, at least halfheartedly. He'd mount and she'd kick him away. He'd come back with hoof scrapes on his bony shoulders, begging for more. By then Sister Higbey would be out of her house with a broom, shaking it at us to get on home before she called our mamas. We'd scatter and watch sideways as we walked along the fence.

Dad and I left the mare at Mildens' and went home, planning to retrieve her in a week. That next Tuesday night at the weekly church youth meeting, the boys my age seemed particularly interested in addressing me. Turned out that Bill Mildens had invited the Scout troop out for an educational activity.

"We watched your horse get pregnant," John

Jensen grinned.

Kent Jolley snickered behind him. "You shoulda seen him go after her!" Kent exploded. "Geez, I thought he was gonna . . ."

"Shut up, jerkface!" John gave him a slug. Kent's freckled face turned red and he staggered away, laughing too hard to catch his breath. I saw him again later, with Brett and Jason, whispering and gesturing at the end of the hall. They stopped when they saw me, guffawed, and disappeared around the corner.

"Goll," said my friend Laurie, smoothing her hair. "What's with them?"

I told her I didn't know. Maybe I didn't.

I was in school the day Dad brought the mare back to the pasture behind my Grandma's house. I walked through the apple orchard to give her oats and brush her down. She nickered and nuzzled like she always did, apparently unaltered, but I caressed her more gently than usual, then sat on the stile and cried for no reason.

Recognizing my ignorance is my premise on discussing eros in Mormon literature today. I think, despite Bruce Jorgensen's commendable confidence that we are all experts, that we are otherwise. My only expertise is in my own experience; and like all other things that matter to me, all other things that confuse me, all other things that are difficult and perplexing to me, I need stories that precede mine. I need stories to help me contextualize my own.

Implications

Obviously, this is extremely difficult for us when we are discussing a subject that is private, intimate, and susceptible to mistrust. Writing about the erotic means balancing between communal and one-on-one interaction. I think I focused primarily on pre-marital experiences because I do not yet trust myself, either in fiction or nonfiction, to stay on the tightwire in addressing current experience. But I do think it's intriguing how this particular piece of writing, which is becoming more and more public, originated in an intimate interchange between my husband and me. It has begun to draw in perspective for both of us as it has extended outside of us. And it has made us

consider ongoing experience in meaningful narrative terms.

I have been surprised by the consistent quality of the responses from women who have read this essay. I originally wrote it as a joke on myself. I thought I really was the only person in the world who was so naive as a teenager, so willing to believe my parents and my community on the mores of that society. Yet most of the women who have read it have reciprocated with stories of their own, stories that have been, I must admit, terribly reassuring to me, even in the contrasts. I have understood for the first time how much I have in common with young and old, married and single, LDS and non-LDS women.

Why have I not heard such stories before? I don't think that the cultural taboos against public discussion of sex are really so strong that they can enforce complete silence on the subject among the neighborly confidences of Mormon women. Granted a congenial setting, many of the women I know best in our ward are delightfully irreverent, willing to laugh at themselves, and eager to examine personal experience in the broader light of social context. It may be that the more powerful constraints of our Victorian heritage left us with a dearth of narrative tradition regarding the erotic, leaving us without the narrative structures we need to substantiate significant experience.

Yet, on the other hand, as I've begun to write about it, thought about the effects of writing it, and considered what I'd like to write in the future, I've realized that there is a remarkable canon of Mormon literature that does deal with the erotic. Many times it is oblique enough to escape immediate recall, but as I consider the range I am surprised that I have not taken better notice. For example, in Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua*, the consummation of Clory's marriage is horrifying enough to be classified in my mind as a rape. Virginia Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning Star* is an in-depth examination of the effects of infidelity and fidelity in generations of marriages. Linda Sillitoe's short story "Coyote Tracks" portrays a powerful, intimate moment which our cultural mindset would categorize as illicit and evil. Yet it contains one of the most transcendent

epiphanies of love and forgiveness that I've ever read. Levi Peterson's "Wayne County Romance" revives middle-aged, mid-marriage love with enthusiasm and humor.

We do have a surprisingly broad range, but I guess what had not sparked for me until recently was the consciousness to recognize it, to see it and read it and draw it into my own experience. For some reason, up until now, those circuits have been closed.

I guess I'm suggesting that we simply talk about sex more. I don't know exactly how. I think we need to start talking about it first between ourselves and our sexual partners. That can be difficult—in some ways harder than abstracting for more public discourse. Obviously, it must be an ongoing, long-term conversation. We need to prepare our children more, not just for honeymoon mechanics but for the real relationship. I believe that much of the pain and the long-term effects of the difficulties in any of our relationships comes from being unprepared, in any realistic way, for the complexities. I was unprepared to comprehend that the nature of our sexual relations would frequently be the key to success in our marriage. It's a much bigger issue than I ever imagined, but I haven't been able to articulate it until recently, until far into my marriage when my oblivion had done some damage.

I think we also need to talk about it communally in ways that are nonharmful, in ways that are not breaches of intimacy, that give us perspective and context, that allow us clear passage from the intimacies of marriage to the shared experience of humanity and back again. And finally, moving from that oral tradition, I think we need to write, with no apologies, with no pretense, and with no didacticism. We need narrative. We can draw personal and communal meaning from experience when we have it written down, when we have it recorded, when we make it accessible to each other.

Monks, Missionaries, and Eros

Margaret Blair Young

I felt nervous enough about some of the stories in *Love Chains*, my forthcoming collection, that I decided I'd better preface them with a little introduction, a statement of faith, if you will. Bruce Jorgensen thinks I should make the preface an optional pamphlet, labelled something like: "If you buy this book and want to know if you need to talk to Margaret's stake president, here's a leaflet explaining who she really is." The pamphlet would then purport me to be a believer—which I am. However, there is sex in a good part of what I write. Bruce J. tells me he thinks I write about sex quite a lot. In response, I say, NOT TRUE. I *never* write about sex. I try to be verisimilar in my characters' lives, and sex is a part of many of my characters' lives, but I leave writing about sex to Masters and Johnson and John Updike. Nonetheless, there are surely some who would accuse me of always writing about sex, and there are some who would be, or have been, offended by my work.

I can understand getting offended by sexual imagery; I've been so offended myself. When I was about nineteen, living in Denver, working in a little office, a certain guy brought in a plastic doll, Barbie-size, of a Catholic monk. It looked innocent enough. But when he pressed a button, a little plastic penis would poke out through the little plastic robes. I found that so offensive, I literally became sick. He was treating me, as I saw it, with utter lack of respect, and he was mocking sacred things. For over a week, the memory of that doll would send chills of disgust through me.

Later, when some people became offended by sexual content in my writing, it struck me that they were perceiving me just as I had perceived the guy with the doll. As they saw it, I was mocking sacred things.

My first experience with having people get offended by my writing came about very innocently. I wrote a story called "The Affair," which won a BYU contest and was subsequently published in *Student Review*. It didn't even occur to me that there was a problem with the story, or that it dealt with sex in any but the most innocuous ways. But

after its publication, the *SR* editor resigned, reviling the story in his printed letter as "vulgar." I was stunned and hurt. I lost sleep over it, and felt that whenever I showed my face on the BYU campus, people—maybe even my students—were pointing at me and saying: "That's Margaret Young. She writes porn." They were seeing me with a plastic doll, as it were.

Concurrently, I had a rather autobiographical story coming out in *Dialogue*, called "Outsiders." It also contained sex and dealt with very touchy issues. Well, after the repercussions of my publishing "The Affair," I decided I would not have my whole name on "Outsiders." So it was published with the byline, "M. J. Young." I saw Richard Cracroft in the grocery store the next day. He said, "Oh, I enjoyed your story." (*My story! You knew?*) The following day, I saw Gene England, who said, "Good story." I answered, "Gee, I thought if I just used my initials, people wouldn't know I was the author." In typical Gene England style, he said, "You know, Margaret, if you're going to be a writer, you're going to have to face up to the responsibility of it."

So when he anthologized "Outsiders" in *Bright Angels and Familiars*, I put my full name on it.

Interestingly, after I did a reading of "Outsiders," Kathy Evans said to me: "What a brave thing for you to write!" Now that is an interesting word to use to a writer! Brave. I don't think of myself as being a "brave" writer, broaching terribly controversial and dangerous issues. I try to approach verisimilitude and that's the extent of my bravery. And I have to juxtapose Kathy's comment with the biggest insult I have ever received as a writer, which is when I was doing a book signing for *House without Walls*, my first book (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991)—which is a very orthodox book. A librarian approached me and said, "Oh, yes, I recommended this book to one of my patrons. She's one who doesn't really like to be challenged and this book looked like it would be safe." Guess how that felt! About as bad as having my work labelled "vulgar" in a public letter. Now, I don't want to be cavorting on thin ice; I have not set out to be known as the writer who writes

all sorts of *really* challenging, difficult, dangerous books. I hope my fiction would have more life than dangerous issues. But I certainly don't want to be known as someone who is *safe*. "Pick up one of her books. You'll never be offended. She never writes anything unSAFE." Gag me! I would hope I'd never marginalize an issue that was hard to face because I wanted to be known as a "safe writer."

So when I include sex in one of my works, am I being unsafe? Is this unsafe sex I am referring to here? Maybe so. I think sex is difficult for us to face because it's so private and because in a work of literature, you are sometimes invited to witness people engaged in sexual activity. Nevertheless, in some works, the sex has simply got to be there. My current project, titled either *Bones* or *Dear Stone*, is an example of such a text, and is a fictionalized slice of my life.

The fact behind the fiction is this: My husband's younger sister has had multiple sclerosis for about fifteen years—the worst kind, no remission. When Bruce and I married ten years ago, we went to see her in Hawaii. She was in a wheelchair but still able to use her arms, still able to speak. Since then, the disease has caused her body to atrophy almost completely. Now, she has no movement, no speech, and is going blind—turning into a statue.

Two years ago, her husband took her to the airport, ostensibly to send her to see her parents, and announced there and then that it was time she go to a rest home in Utah, where rest homes are comparatively cheap, and by the way, they would need to be divorced because even cheap rest homes cost a lot of money and Medicaid will only cover if you're a destitute ward of the state. (It wasn't too surprising that three days after the divorce was final, he married someone else.)

While all of this was happening around me, I found that every time I sat down to write, something to do with multiple sclerosis was coming out of my fingers onto the computer. So I finally talked to my sister-in-law and asked permission to do this. It is not her story, but it is certainly motivated by her story.

When I was lying in bed musing over the plot line, I thought of writing something about

this terrible guy who divorces his wife because she has multiple sclerosis, then gets in a car accident and becomes a quadriplegic and gets sent to the same rest home she's in. Now, can you tell the problem with that story? That is a vindictive story. And we don't do that. Not if we're trying to be good—good people and good writers. You don't put black hats and white hats on your characters, and you don't have somebody come to the great epiphany: "I am really a jerk. And I'm really sorry I did all those things to you." We make up fantasies like this when we're kids, and when we're adults too, sometimes, and we want the person who has hurt us to recognize how terrible they really are. But good writing doesn't participate in such antics.

So the issue for me as I started writing and really looking at the husband in this story—and because I'm fictionalizing it, he's not the real husband—the real issue became sex. What would it truly be like to have your wife incapacitated in that way? You deal with her sexual organs, but you deal with them only because you help her go to the bathroom. How would it be? Thus I began to deal with this character as a man, not a jerk—a human being in a marriage where his sexual needs could not be met and where he's watching his wife turn to stone. An excerpt follows:

There had been such moments of glory during their early lovemaking, moments when the heavens seemed to open as Merry opened, when the room got lighter, warmer, as he went into her. The smoothness, firmness of her young flesh, her easy response, eager embraces, and a body that let her. Their wedding night, when they undressed each other and just touched, kissed, stroked, licked, till nearly dawn. They didn't have sex until their second night married, and it didn't get easy until their fifth time—in Hawaii, a full week wed, both of them damp from the ocean. They were in their hotel room on the Big Island, on the floor, the window above them open to a full view of smoking Kilauea. Only seventy yards away, the mountain was drooling red-gold lava into the sea, expanding its claim on the Pacific.

The disease hadn't interfered with sex for a long time, though Merry was always tired. Of course, as the MS progressed, sex—like everything else in their life—was broken down into process. Ben would arrange her body to accommodate his own, then go inside her. She could not respond as she once had, but she could kiss him when he put his mouth on hers.

The last time—four years ago—he had parted her legs and stroked her stomach, but couldn't come, couldn't keep himself stiff, because he suddenly saw himself and what he was doing: thrusting into where she was shrivelling, into the disease itself. It was one of the two times he had sobbed over the MS, collapsing onto her, clinging to her around the waist, both of them naked, both exposed.

In the course of this novel, he has an affair with the nurse taking care of his wife, and there are sex scenes between the two of them. I really hope they're not as titillating as they are painful, because I see Ben's adultery as pained sexuality, and eventually I even bring the husband back to his wife. It should be clear how I feel about the sex in this novel: it is a vital, organic component of it. It is also the means I used as a writer to distance myself from anger toward my sister-in-law's ex-husband, and to fully humanize the husband in this novel.

When I think about sex in the stories I've written, sex in the literature I've read, as by Levi Peterson, I do recognize that it makes some readers very nervous. I can even relate to some of that nervousness. Frankly, I'd prefer that my own kids not read some of my fiction yet.

One thing that occurred to me as I've thought about this subject is that a lot of our writing about eroticism or sexuality deals with very rural characters. Levi Peterson has cowboyesque fellows in a lot of his writing. I think we cut a lot of slack for rural characters. Similarly, there's a real say-anything woman in my ward at home, who once opened a Sunday School lesson saying, "Brothers and sisters, we live in the world of the almighty dollar and the almighty orgasm." This is not the typical way to start Sunday School, but

you have to know the woman who's saying it. We cut her slack, too, because of who she is. I even thought about Shakespeare, who has somebody like Iago refer to "making the beast with two backs." Shakespeare's rather banal characters talk very directly about sex, but the more elevated ones tend not to; they're more dignified in their discussions. As I consider it, I suspect maybe a lot of writers deal with eros by using earthy characters—fellows who are consummately rural, down home, who mess around with manure, and would probably do things like have sex and talk about it afterwards. Perhaps writers, and especially Mormon writers who have a vision of exalted sexuality—the idea that sex is sacred—seek thus to bring us down to earth, to a very real, tangible world, where people plant seed in the earth and have real, tangible sex with a real, tangible partner. Maybe that's a way we can present sex without mocking it. It won't be a monk with the erection, but his brother, the guy who drives a truck and is liable to say or do just about anything.

Obviously, though, many Mormon writers include sex in very dignified, even sanctified lives. It won't be a monk, but it might be a missionary—yes, wearing temple garments—who deals with his sexuality. And if it's not a plastic missionary, but a flesh-and-blood one, someone we can really believe in, we as readers will feel—at least I'd hope we'd feel—the depth of his dilemma, and of his desire. We won't feel that his sexuality is being mocked—no plastic penises, please!—but simply included in his complete humanity, one of the conflicts he must deal with.

And good writing is about conflict. It's about the collision between heaven and earth; for it to work well, writers cannot stay in the realm of the ethereal vision. Writers must live in and care about what happens here on earth, even the conflicts in the human heart, the conflict between the earth and heaven. I think the Song of Solomon is marginalized in some ways because it is so tangible, so present and sexual. Even though it is sacred, it merges the two worlds—the mortal and the immortal—in a way that can be almost frightening.

I wanted to conclude by reading a little

passage from Toni Morrison, one of my favorite authors. She describes what I think a lot of Mormon writers are reacting against—the idea that the body can be hated, or, to be more explicit, that sex could be considered either a dirty secret or something so sacred it's untouchable and unspeakable. Morrison's novel *Beloved* is set during times of slavery. Baby Suggs is talking:

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh, flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people, they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face, cause they don't love that either. You got to love it—you! ... love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet, more than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize." (88-89)

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Notes

1. See Heiserman 4-5. My favorite instance of the genre is Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, on which there is a good monograph (McQueen). One treatment of the genre which I have not read but which looks very germane to this discussion is Konstan.
2. As of January 1995, the Course 15 manual has been phased out of use. I have not found an original source for this passage, nor can I find that the author has published the complete text from which it comes, so I cannot deal with it in its full context. Given the publication date of this excerpt, it may be one source for the abundant "poison" metaphors I had heard by 1979 and had in mind in my 1986 response to Levi Peterson; of course, "filth" is one long-standing denigrative metaphor in English for all representations of sex.
3. This passage gives translators enormous, notorious difficulty. See Falk 174-75; cf. Pope 560-63. Levi Peterson echoes this passage in his story "Night Soil": when Pansy helps Pickett bathe and turns her back while he washes his "dainties," then surreptitiously strips and asks, "Pickett, am I pretty?" Pickett answers, "Oh Lord, just like a sunrise" (Peterson 187). Pickett in his own way sings the Song of Songs.
4. See Irwin (glossary). These and other terms raise complex issues. David Konstan, in the Introduction to his book, remarks that eros "was associated with the most passionate kind of infatuation, an intense and irresistible attraction that was naturally given narrative expression as a form of transgression, since it was precisely the insensitivity of eros to all boundaries and limits that exhibited its overwhelming power over the individual" (13).
5. Athanassakis suggests that in the Orphic cosmogonies Eros is the first god to emerge from the primeval cosmic egg (42n).
6. Gay 620, 645-47, 649, 754-56. The quoted phrase occurs on 649; and of course I somewhat oversimplify Freud, yet I am essentially accurate.

When Mormon Literature Becomes "Mormon":
A Panel with Scott Abbott, Susan Elizabeth Howe, B. W.
Jorgensen, and Brian Evenson, Moderated by
Marni Asplund-Campbell

Genteel Mutterings

Marni Asplund-Campbell, Moderator

Once, when accused by the then-editor of *Dialogue*, Bob Rees, of "wantonly combining purple poetry with the plain and prosaic," my father, a closet poet and secret champion of what we might call Mormon literature, replied that such schizoid language was deliberate. "It was the language," he wrote, "of a people who could talk of the celestial kingdom and a two-year's supply with the same breath—or rather," he wrote, demonstrating his propensity for purple prose, "with the same breathlessness."

As a child growing up far from anything like Mormon culture, I came to know and understand Mormonism, as distinct from my religious practice, from a combined reading of *Dialogue* and official Church magazines. I remember poring for hours over the "Friends in the News" page in the *Children's Friend*, looking carefully at the small pictures of other Mormon children like me from exotic places like West Jordan, reading about their many activities, like "Janna Lee loves to go to Primary" and "Sarah has three little brothers."

As I grew older, it was the stories of Jack Weyland that brought me into contact with Mormonism. I loved them. I still love them, for certain reasons—their broad characters and their easy conclusion to their difficulties. These texts specifically gave me a sense, if distorted, of a world beyond my limited psyche, a world which concretely represented an abstract reality of my religion. Reading *Dialogue*, I saw that there was a possible discourse within that world, some dis-

agreement about what defines happiness and human experience and plot resolutions. I came to understand that literature was exciting often when it had some sense of tension.

Between these two extremes of my personal literary experience lies the question: which one is right? In other words, according to my training, which one is Mormon? Behind the question of what Mormon literature is lies the more directed and perhaps more dangerous question of what should Mormon literature do. (You'll notice the inevitable industrious correlation between being and doing.) There is the further question: What should literature do? Should it do anything?

I just read my course evaluations from spring semester. One student who evaluated me favorably in areas of knowledge and teaching, wrote very harshly that he did not appreciate spending good money to have a BYU professor challenge and ultimately discard his LDS values. This is a criticism which I take very seriously. His complaint originated during a semester in which we read Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. He told me during the semester that, given its portrayal of sexuality, *Beloved* would be considered R-rated and therefore was not suitable for inclusion in a course at BYU.

The question of what literature should do, and if it should do anything, is fraught with dangerous provisions—not just in the Mormon community but in popular culture as well. We as Mormons know what we should and should not watch, and it becomes easy to transfer that to what we should and should not read. The danger is that at some point we forget to know what we should and should not see. What do we see in Mormon literature? Hopefully truth—truth which transcends

even the definitions of Mormonism. Can we honestly claim to write from outside of our Mormon identity? Can we ever objectively divorce ourselves from a language which is built, in part, from religious and spiritual experience? Should we want to remove ourselves from the cultural appellation *Mormon*? Hopefully we'll all be able to explore these questions today and find that the issues and the literature are much more than genteel mutterings of people who have too much time on their hands but become the essence of our faith.

The Provo Window: Late Night Thoughts on the Purposes of Art and the Decline of a University

Scott Abbott

I'd like to say first that my son Joseph was one of Marni's students last year, and I'm very grateful for the challenges that she gave to him in his first year of college.

If Brian Evenson were a painter (and maybe he is, for all I know) and if he were to paint something related to the violent themes of some of his stories, he might depict the following scene, which I imagine, for whatever reasons, in the fleshy forms and colors of the school of Rubens:

Dominating the front center of the painting, a strong and beautiful woman stands before a long banquet table, on which are a loaf of bread and a whole lobster. One guest grips a large glass of red wine. A servant holds aloft a platter with a cooked pheasant. The woman wears a flowing red dress, a dangerously provocative dress, cut impossibly low over taut breasts. Her hair is pulled back and done up in jewels. Her right hand holds a platter whose cover her coy left hand lifts to reveal the soggy head of a bearded, long-haired man. On her face is a smile both mischievous and erotic, and her bright eyes stare a necrophilic sexual challenge at a king who sits convulsed at the head of the table. Although the phallic sword hanging from his belt signifies his power, the king's eyes bug out of his reddened face as he sees what the woman has brought him, and his left

hand, also flushed, grips the tablecloth with a stranglehold. To emphasize the state to which he has sunk, the painter places the paw of a dog, largely invisible under the table, over the king's well-shod foot. Making a similar point, perhaps, a dwarf stands behind the woman in red, holding the leash of a monkey.

The dwarf is the only one of the twelve characters in the painting who is not somehow caught up in the moment, including, most strikingly, three women: a nun, her thick lips open in passion, gazes in religious ecstasy at the severed head; a woman with a madonna's gentle face watches the woman in red with sweet and perhaps erotic affection; and, next to the king, wearing a dainty black hat, pearls, and a brown satin dress with décolletage, sits a young woman with a curiously satisfied expression. Her left hand reaches for the plate the woman in red proffers, and her right hand, bent daintily, holds a little three-pronged fork to the head's black lips. The dwarf, while the others express horror, sexual desire, challenge, surprise, or even, in the case of the woman with the fork—the desire to eat, coolly stares out of the painting at the viewer, confronting us with questions about our own involvement: our complicity, our pity, our deviant desires, our outrage, our religious sensibilities—our reasons, in short, for studying the painting so intently. If we take up his invitation, becoming self-conscious guests at the feast, we put ourselves in positions of risk. We can never be quite the person we were before the artistic confrontation.

It's an old story, of course: Salome offering the head of John the Baptist to Herod. As you may have already surmised, the painting I have described is not my own invention but is from the school of Rubens and hangs on the fifth floor of the BYU Library across from the humanities reference desk. It is mostly ignored, with the exception of an occasional child who, lacking both the art-historical context and the general human experience education will bring, looks at the painting with the same eyes that will register her

or his first artistic depiction of a nude, and says "gross."

That, I think, is a fair description of what has happened at BYU with Brian Evenson's book *Altmann's Tongue*. On the basis of passages cited out of context in an anonymous letter, several authorities have said "gross." (In fact, in a statement quoted in the *Daily Universe* [11 July 1995] BYU President Rex Lee used that very word: "If [Evenson's] future work follows the same pattern of extreme sadism, brutality and *gross* degradation of women characteristic of 'Altmann's Tongue,' such a publication would, in our view, not further his cause as a candidate for continuing faculty status.") Possessing power the child does not, members of our administration have forced Brian to leave BYU. I don't use the word "force" loosely.

On January 16 of this year, the chair of the English Department wrote, in a letter to Academic Vice President Todd Britsch, that he "met with Brian just a few days following the meeting with Elder Eyring [Commissioner of Education] Nov. 9. . . . The bottom line is that he knows that this book is unacceptable coming from a BYU faculty member and that further publications like it will bring repercussions." Brian appealed this summary judgment in a meeting with BYU President Rex Lee and Provost Bruce Hafen; he reports that they failed to listen to his arguments.

Subsequently, members of the executive committee of BYU's newly formed chapter of the American Association of University Professors met with President Lee to express concerns about Brian's case and academic freedom in general. We asked what there was about the stories in *Altmann's Tongue* that the administration found objectionable. President Lee referred to the title story and said it was about a man who killed another man after he suggested he cut out the tongue of Altmann, whom he has just killed. I had just published a short piece in the *Student Review* on the story and walked President Lee through my argument:

The narrator states at the beginning that after he killed Altmann someone named Horst told him that if he were to eat Altmann's tongue he would be wise; he would speak the

language of the birds. The narrator says that he then knocked Horst down and killed him. He had been right to kill Altmann, he thought, the choice had been a good one. Killing Horst wasn't quite as clearly justified, he says, but still, he felt remarkably calm. All people are either like Horst or Altmann, the narrator thought further, except for himself. He is either the *sole exception* or the *unique exception*, he couldn't quite decide. Then he flew about, a foul bird: "I stuttered, spattered a path through the branches of trees, sprung fluttering into blank sky."

The story comes alive when you recognize that Klaus Barbie, the infamous Nazi "Butcher of Lyon," went by the name Altmann while hiding in South America. That explains, for example, the narrator's justification for killing Altmann: "There are people, Altmann among them, who when you have sent a bullet through their skull, you know you have done the right thing."

And what about Horst's devilish promise of wisdom, of the ability to speak the language of the birds, if the narrator would eat Altmann's tongue?

It happens: the narrator kills Altmann, kills Horst, and then begins thinking and talking in the language of the mass murderer. He is the "sole exception," so different from the rest of humanity that his violence is justified. And he flies off, in the end, smelling his "foul feathers and flesh." Through his acts of violence and subsequent justifications he becomes what he has killed.

It feels like an important story for students and faculty in my department (Germanic and Slavic Languages), I said. (And, in fact, most of the faculty in the department had met the previous Tuesday for a productive discussion of the first three stories of the book.) The weight of the Holocaust must be borne. The lessons of history must be recalculated constantly. We must remember where language can take us. Our rhetoric must not justify violence. We must not kill. (Abbott 3)

Are all the stories about the Holocaust? asked a visibly surprised President Lee. Many are, I answered, including "Killing Cats," "The Munich Window," "The Abbreviated and Tragical History of the Auschwitz Barber," and "A Conversation with Brenner." What about the story where the serial killer carves stars in the backs of his victims? President Lee asked. There does not seem to be anything moral in that. Bruce Jorgensen has just read a paper, I said, that interprets that story as a depiction of

a restless, frustrated, destructive male will. . . .

[R]unning on No-Doz, he drives a truck, a tangible, even trite, symbol of male will, through Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, and into Texas, killing as he goes, and loading "her other bodies" into the dark and otherwise empty cargo compartment behind the cab. The truck has to be a U-Haul: you do haul; you haul your murderous will and the debris of its acts, the burden of what you've done. And what you want, finally, is rest. (Jorgensen 4)

The male will, patriarchy, the Holocaust, violence against the helpless: surely these are worthy topics for a BYU professor.

President Lee didn't, finally, agree with Bruce's and my readings of these stories, but neither did he disagree. I ended the discussion by pointing out that Brian's stories require an active reader with specialized skill and that there is no reason to expect everyone to understand them. You are a legal scholar, I said, trained to read and understand texts to which I have little access. But why should you expect to be able to understand a complicated, subtle piece of literature? If you have questions about evolution and the Church, you consult a professor of zoology. And if you want to understand a difficult piece of literature, you consult scholars of literature. What has happened here is that readers in Salt Lake and in your administration have made decisions about Brian Evenson's future at BYU in response to an anonymous letter and without the benefit of expert witnesses. That unsettles everyone at the university who works on sensitive issues.

That's the first part of my talk. In the second

I want to turn to my own experience with what is, for me, the most troubling story of the book: "The Munich Window."

Many of you know the story, told from the perspective of a man who, after a suspicious accident in which his wife leapt to her death from the window of their Dresden apartment, "found it expedient to leave Germany for warmer, more hospitable climes." After eighteen years he was forced to return to Germany by his surviving daughter's threats to take legal action to have him extradited back to Germany to face charges of murder and child sexual abuse. In writing the story, which he calls "A Persecution," the obsessively clean and self-righteous man ("I had never fallen into the vice of drinking alcoholic beverages") recounts his version of the encounter with his daughter and her therapist, a series of violent incidents during which he ultimately kills the therapist and then psychologically bullies his daughter until she gives up the evidence she has against him and jumps from a Munich window to her death. The narrator tells this self-incriminating story in the full belief that he is vindicating himself. As he finishes telling the story, immediately after forcing his daughter to decide to jump, he exclaims: "I am blameless. *Alis volabat propriis*. She jumped entirely of her own volition. Just like her mother" (42).

Like many of Brian Evenson's stories, "A Munich Window" can be read on several levels. The story is, for example, an allegory of Germany after the war, of the founders of the new republic. The people who take in the man's daughter when he abandons her to flee Germany are named "Grundlers," "founders," and the man is contemptuous of what they have made of her in the intervening eighteen years.

But this story has reached me on a level more profound than historical allegory. I first read "A Munich Window" one night just before falling asleep. Several hours later I woke up from a horrible dream in which I myself was committing the crimes of the story, in which I was the first-person narrator. In the dream, fighting to retain some sense of myself as a decent person, I had repeatedly reminded myself that there was a narra-

succeeded in widening the gap between myself and the vicious actions of the narrator, some inexorable force pressed me and the story back together, squeezing out the buffering narrator. I woke up in the middle of the struggle and, even awake, found myself working to reinsert the narrator between myself and the story.

Why was I so disturbed? Why did the story move me so deeply? It has to be, I think, because I identified with the narrator. I haven't driven my wife to suicide, nor have I sexually abused my children. But I am a man, I have a wife and daughter, and I do participate in the fatherhood and patriarchy the narrator claims as his own realms of action when he forbids the therapist to tell him how a father should act. She knows nothing about fatherhood and patriarchy, he says. Her response is to show him the pornographic photos he has taken of his daughter and to ask incredulously: "Nothing about? Nothing about?" (33)

When I watch the narrator oppose his powerful linear thinking to what he calls his daughter's instinct, when I see him magnify her faults and ignore his own, when I witness his attempt to force his daughter to see the world as he sees it, and finally, when I observe his use of masculine physical strength against the women in the story, I am left burning with shame. That's me. That's the way I and the other men of our society have been socialized to act. Why should I suppose I am immune to the abuses of authority that Section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants warns me of?

Like the prophets and the feminists who have taught us to see and beware of the debilitating power structures we all are caught up in, the analyst in the story makes explicit the evils of the narrator's patriarchal, pornographic fatherhood. His response is to force her into the train's lavatory and to dispose of her. He then gets rid of all the incriminating evidence, bullies his daughter into suicide, and disavows any blame. As the shocked, shamed, dismayed reader of his text, however, I am left speaking words diametrically opposed to his protestations of innocence: *Mea culpa*, I gasp, I am guilty. Speaking those words, I can begin to heal. Driven to confess by the narrator's unwillingness

to confess, I can make restitution.

Reading the narrator's last words, "I am blameless. . . . She jumped entirely of her own volition. Just like her mother," I am reminded of BYU spokesperson Brent Harker's statement on learning that Brian had accepted a position at Oklahoma State: "He has chosen to take his own destiny in his hands." The university, of course, is blameless. Harker added, "The university's sense of mission and Brian's sense of mission were quite divergent." That feels true to me. Unfortunately, it is Brian's sense of mission I identify with, and it is not the university that is leaving.

To conclude: Brigham Young University is, at the moment, in a schizophrenic position. On the one hand: "The Feast of Herod" hangs in the library; difficult, challenging, and disturbing literature and art and psychology and law and sociology and genetics are taught daily in every department on campus; the bookstore and library are crammed with challenging and disturbing books; and there are thousands of faculty and students who are anxious to engage in the risky and rewarding business that is university education. On the other hand: writers of anonymous letters are dictating the university's agenda; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich cannot speak on campus; and for widely varied but also related reasons Hal Miller, Dan Blickman, Tom DeLong, Bill Evenson (for a time), Meg Wheatly, Tom Matheson, Bill Davis, Tomi Ann Roberts, Cecilia Konchar Farr, David Knowlton, Martha Bradley, Martha Nibley Beck, Reba Keele, and others have left BYU, seeing it as a university without true academic commitment, anxious to leave an institution that stifles creativity and initiative.

And now Brian Evenson, having written the very story that would heal us, is forced from our community. We are left to write an official text blaming the victims and exonerating ourselves, a text that, against our wishes, will reveal our own insanity and inhumanity.

Violence and Aesthetics

Susan Elizabeth Howe

I would like to agree with what Scott has said about BYU's involvement in the whole process of judging Brian's work. I think it's very unfortunate that the academic community was not allowed to act like an academic community. In other words, those people who like Brian's book were not allowed to talk about it and explain why they like it while those people who don't like his book were equally prevented from talking about it and explaining why they don't like it. A process of dialogue brings about real learning and growth, but that process was short-circuited in this case. Now disliking *Altmann's Tongue* puts you, in effect, in the administration's camp. Well, I don't like the book, and I'm not in the university's camp. I don't agree with—and indeed, I protest—such a method of running a university. But I still don't like the book, and I would like to explain why.

I have not considered this book in terms of whether it is Mormon literature or not. That's not a very important distinction to me, except as Mormons accept a place and responsibility within the world community to take part in what I see as moral issues of major consequence.

The primary reality of our generation is this: human beings are incredibly violent; humans have never developed a weapon that they didn't eventually use; we now have weapons that will, if set off, destroy almost all life. In the face of those facts, it seems to me that the moral, spiritual, and intellectual imperative of our time and generation is to conceive of—or to imagine, if you will—ways to resolve conflict that are not violent. We can no longer encourage, accept, or promote violence. I believe that this imperative applies to everyone in all fields with all gifts, including artists. Including literary artists. Any aesthetic must consider morals—what is moral, what is immoral.

To claim primary or exclusive attention to the aesthetic use of language without accepting moral responsibility for what that language says to those who experience it is dishonest or at least a self-deception, because words are necessarily referential.

Colors in a painting don't necessarily need to form shapes that correspond to shapes in the natural world. An artist can create in the viewer an emotional response by means of colors and their relationship to each other. But words mean. They always mean. That's the nature of language. So, in those who read it or hear it, this sentence from "Her Other Bodies," "He . . . stomped upon the woman's skull with his heels until it went pulpy and caved in" (163), does not merely create atmosphere or movement or a free field of language in which morality is unimportant. Rather, the audience of that sentence will imagine a human woman as she is killed.

Brian Evenson claims that his moral purpose in writing these works is to reveal to readers that violence is always ugly, that it is never glamorous although it is portrayed as such so often in film and literature today. He also intends that readers will recognize and be horrified by their own tendency to violence as they identify with characters and situations in the work. In these intentions Brian's work is very moral.

But I would like to look at those questions again. Are we all attracted by and interested in violence? Who, exactly, is attracted by and interested in violence? I think you would have to say that American art and literature are increasingly violent, but I think you would also have to look at the difference in art being created by men and women. I see a distinction in the two. I recently went to the film *Something to Talk About*. As a general rule, previews of coming attractions are matched to the movie currently being shown, but in this case, I saw previews of five movies about serial killers. Five! I didn't want to see any of them. They were clearly violent. I could tell that they would not serve my spirit. They would not make me feel good or healthy or whole.

Who *does* want to see those movies? This is a gross generalization which has many exceptions, but I would say that men are much more interested than women in violent art. Brian's stories are written to men. I base this conclusion on the fact that the female characters are generally only there to be destroyed, sometimes in terrible ways. The female characters in "The Munich Window" are as

dumb as cheese. The woman psychiatrist of the young daughter apparently counsels this girl to confront her father, even though he has murdered her mother and sexually abused her. "Let's confront him," she seems to have advised. "Let's threaten him with exposure so he'll come here." Then the two women go to meet this dangerous man alone. He soon breaks the psychiatrist's nose but she makes no attempt to get police protection. These women characters have no resources and very little intelligence. Their function is to be victims. "The Munich Window" is nothing to read if you're looking for information about how to act as a woman.

"Her Other Bodies" is about a man who is disturbed because a woman has refused to marry him. He leaves her in Idaho and drives toward Texas, periodically stopping to telephone her along the way. She refuses to talk to him, and he kills a woman every chance he gets. I maintain that whether you are a man or a woman makes a great deal of difference in how you read that story. For every female reader, the conclusion is inescapable: the people being killed are beings like you. They have a similar body. You share their vulnerability and victimhood. What is a woman supposed to do with this story?

At one point, the serial killer sees a pleasant-looking young woman in a blue Volvo who is apparently traveling or moving. She has a plant and two baskets of neatly folded laundry in the back seat with two suitcases. The killer follows this woman for hundreds of miles, losing and then finding her again. This episode is presented as a sexual quest, but the climax is not sexual union. Rather, it is the woman's murder with a tire iron.

At another point, the man kills another victim and drags her body to his truck. Part of that incident is presented in this passage:

He unhooked her from his belt, stood, fumbled the back of the truck open.

He tore her skirt in extricating her, saw her bare white skin through the hole. He pushed the skirt up, ran his hands along her thighs. He dragged her up onto the bumper and from there heaved her into the back, laying her down and lowering the door so that her

shoulders and head were in the darkness, her legs and hips dangling off the back.

He got out a cigarette, got it lit, took a few drags. He pulled the silk white panties down around her knees, ran his fingers up past them. He prodded her with his tire iron. With his cigarette he burned her up one thigh, down the other. He crawled on top of her, kneed her back along the floor with him, back among her other bodies. (165)

This passage is erotic. Catherine MacKinnon, in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, has written: "Male sexuality is apparently activated by violence against women and expresses itself in violence against women to a significant extent" (145; see also 126-54). The linking of sexuality and violence in this passage eroticizes murder. A fiction creates a world. For the informed readers whom Brian intends as the readers of his stories, this passage would be moral; although he never intends anyone to enjoy this passage, I think he intends for men to be erotically stimulated by it and to be horrified by their response.

But there's another way that many people will read this work. Even as the story presents a character and demonstrates that character to be depraved and repugnant, it also creates a fictional world that many readers see as corresponding to the conditions of the real world. If, in that fictional world, the only choices are to be a victim or a victimizer, most readers would rather be the aggressor. If the only choices are to become brutal or dead, most readers will feel that brutality is just self-defense.

I want to argue strongly that this choice is not a moral choice. I do not accept the necessity of an aesthetic in which brutality or victimization are the only choices. I don't see such an aesthetic as meeting the major need of our times. I repeat: It seems to me that the moral, spiritual, and intellectual imperative of our time and generation is to transform violence into some other method of resolving conflict. That does not mean pretending that the violence is not a major part of the world. It does mean that a writer should give readers other aesthetic and artistic options. Can we imagine that? Do we have the moral capacity to imagine in art ways of solving conflict other than violence?

Such a dramatic change can come about only in the general shift of thinking of a whole people. The stories we claim as a society are powerful, even an unconscious force, in creating the metaphors that help us construct our lives. Would it not be a much more challenging and essential project for Brian, with his great gift—he is an astonishing writer—to create images of people responding to conflict without either becoming victims or resorting to the violence that makes others become victims?

Losing My Life in the Story

B. W. Jorgensen

As I sit here listening to Scott and Susan, who don't entirely agree with one another or with me—and these are colleagues who are both very dear to me—the deepest regret for me out of this whole affair is that we are not having this discussion in public on the BYU campus. (Applause) We are not there arguing with Brian and with one another about his stories and how they work on us and what they are useful for. That is, in fact, what we ought to be doing at BYU. Scott and Susan and I agree on this point.

In his autobiography, Graham Greene tells this story about his novel *The Power and the Glory*:

Some ten years after publication the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster read me a letter from the Holy Office condemning my novel because it was "paradoxical" and "dealt with extraordinary circumstances." The price of liberty, even within a Church, is eternal vigilance, but I wonder whether any of the totalitarian states, whether of the right or of the left, with which Church of Rome is often compared, would have treated me as gently when I refused to review the book on the casuistical ground that the copyright was in the hands of my publishers. There was no public condemnation, and the affair was allowed to drop into that peaceful oblivion which the Church wisely reserves for unimportant issues. Years later, when I met Pope Paul VI, he mentioned that he had read the book. I told him that it had been condemned by the Holy Office.

"Who condemned it?"

"Cardinal Pissardo."

He repeated the name with a wry smile and added, "Mr. Greene, some parts of your books are certain to offend some Catholics, but you should pay no attention to that." (86-87) That's another reason—along with Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, and Flannery O'Connor—for *occasionally* wishing you were a Catholic. But I'm a Mormon and intend to remain one. And I intended to address the question: Is *Altmann's Tongue* Mormon fiction? My answer is: Yes, I think so; but we need to talk about it.

In 1979, in an essay on Virginia Sorensen's novel *The Evening and the Morning*, and partly on the general question of the relation of Mormon belief to Mormon fiction, I wrote the following suggestion:

Suppose a "Mormon novelist" [or fiction writer] in a quite strenuous sense: nominally and actively Mormon, a baptized member who accepts Mormon scripture as canonical, Mormon prophets as authoritative, Mormon doctrine (that is, "the gospel" at least as embodied in the scriptures) as a true and adequate, if not exhaustively complete, vision and interpretation of the world, of the human self and its sights and doings, and of God; who both accepts and experiences Mormon ordinances as efficacious channels of God's power; who cleaves to the covenants of baptism, sacrament, priesthood, and temple; and who finally also writes the extended prose narratives we call novels [or, if you like, short stories]. What kinds of novels might such a writer make? At one imaginable limit, he might write detective thrillers, or nihilistic science-fiction [I was remembering that I'd heard Scott Card say that God was not possible in science fiction], or maybe even pornography; for . . . writing is after all a vocation just as plumbing is, and we never seem to bother about whether we've called a Mormon plumber when the drain backs up—the question is simply, how good at his craft is this worker? But of course near its limit the analogy sunders: a writer's beliefs and commitments must influence his craft in ways that a

plumber's will not. [From my current perspective, I think that I *would* rather have a good Mormon plumber. I'd hope that he was honest, and above all, dedicated to the details of his craft as someone who believes that matter is real and matters.] And some of us, Mormon or not, might regard a writer's very choice of tough-guy, S-F, or porn as the kind of self-betrayal that calls in question the integrity of all the writer's professed beliefs. [You see now that I was almost prophetic sixteen years ago.] We hope that any serious writer's major and minor artistic choices will somehow accord with those life-commitments that lie close to the foundation of his personality and set the angle and force of all his intentions. (43-44)

And that would be the other limit—the limit at which we feel there is somehow a deep oneness between the writer's commitments and his or her fiction, as I would suspect in the case of someone like Flannery O'Connor, though her salty letters may make you wonder. And you sometimes wonder how she felt about her mother.

I was smart enough to acknowledge then that "most writers and their books, alas and hurrah, fall somewhere between these limits, on muddled middle ground where we have to map and make our way with intelligent care" (44). Looking at it now, I think my abstract description of a Mormon writer "in a quite strenuous sense" would fit most of the Mormon fiction writers I know, or as far as I know, as far as I presume to guess. I guess it fits Scott Card and Brian Evenson about equally well. I would have to make a slight exception for Levi Peterson, a self-described "backslider" and "Christian by yearning." And I suppose that most of us fall short from time to time on one or another of my strenuous criteria; besides, I left out tithing, genealogy, Primary sharing-time, cannery duty, and Boy Scout ordeals in the Uintahs, and so forth.

What I proposed in 1979 was something like this. First, one had to make a distinction not often made in Mormon culture among fictions—the distinction between *didactic* and *mimetic* fiction. Didactic fictions are constructed in order to exemplify the truth of this or that belief on the

part of the writer or to criticize or ridicule some target external to the fiction. Those two forms are called *apologue* and *satire*. The other form, which I am calling mimetic, the Chicago critic Sheldon Sacks calls "the novel as represented action." In the first two kinds of fiction, either the writer's long-range doctrinal commitments will be very clear or his or her short-range targets in the actual world will be very clear. In the other kind of fiction, represented action or nondidactic fiction, oddly, or somewhat counterintuitively, it turns out that the writer's beliefs will be evident in almost every line; they are present as that set of criteria or values which, in order for the story to be coherent at all, it must appeal to in judging the characters and their thoughts and actions. That is, I was trying to explain that I had learned there were different ways writers might demonstrate their loyalty to this or that belief, or, in Mormon terms, their "testimony."

The first clause in the title story of Brian's book is: "After I had killed Altmann . . ." (13). Reading that clause is a very complicated experience. I am not "I," yet as I read that clause, I perform "I." "I" confess to having killed Altmann. Now, in reality, I have not killed anybody. What takes place first of all is what I call "formal identification"; to read the sentence at all, I must formally identify with the "I" that speaks that sentence; I become the "I." But I'm not "I." I'm still myself, and I'm quite free to be whoever I want to be. But the word "killed" inevitably for me as a Mormon reader invokes the sixth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill." Many of Brian's stories, in fact, explore what it means to violate that commandment. The very presence of the word on the page for me invokes a value which Brian and I share—and which, I trust, every other member of this panel and this audience likewise shares—that it is a very major and profound commandment: "Thou shalt not kill." I can't read that clause without invoking that value and using it to judge the man who confesses, "I had killed Altmann." In short, from the fourth word of that story, my formal identification with the "I" of the story, necessary for me to read it at all, exists in severe moral tension with my disapproval of the

act he confesses—with my own preference for never having to say that “I had killed” somebody.

That’s a very small illustration. The problem with modern and postmodern fiction is that, like a lot of stories in the Bible, it doesn’t tell you what to think. It simply trusts that you know well enough, from other contexts, what’s good and what’s evil. The Bible does not tell you that the incest committed by Lot’s daughters with their drunken father is evil. I defy you to find any clue in the immediate context of that story that will tell you this is evil. Brian’s fictional rhetoric, alas, is rather deeply like the fictional rhetoric of a great deal of the Old Testament—not to mention the Book of Mormon, although we have a heavy-handed editorial narrator there, Mormon, who often does step in to deplore events in the narrative. “They do it for a token of bravery,” he tells us about the Nephite warriors who rape, torture, and eat Lamanite virgins—an act which I don’t think quite occurs in *Altmann’s Tongue*.

Those are the kinds of things I find myself thinking about. This spring, in a paper Scott has alluded to, I found myself asking questions like these: Can you, like St. Julian [in Gustave Flaubert’s amazing retelling of that saint’s life], lie down with a leper? Too easy, M. Flaubert. Can you love a serial killer? If you are God, if you are Jesus, could you, would you try to save him? That is the question I as a Mormon reader find myself asking, confronted with these horrifying stories—or with these stories which represent horrifying acts, which are morally revolting to me as they are to the author. So why in the world should I suppose that the author is promoting them? If they’re horrifying to me, what business have I to suppose that anyone else finds them otherwise? If I do that, I am saying there are two types of people: type Altmann and type Horst. And it is quite all right to put a bullet through the head of the one kind—and the other kind, maybe; but then you feel a little confused when you’ve done it. You must, then, think of yourself as the “sole moral exception” to these two types of humanity. This book won’t let us off its hook, and that’s one of the troubles with it. No wonder officials at the university are disturbed by it.

One of my main concerns for several years now has been the conduct of Mormon criticism: How shall I as a Mormon read? How shall I serve my God as a reader? I don’t think I do it by condemning the writer. This position, please don’t mistake me, leaves Susan Howe’s questions still to be discussed. Maybe what I’m saying about the conduct of Mormon moral criticism is simply this: “whosoever will lose his life . . . shall find it” (Matt. 16:25; cf. Mark 8:35). Reading, I risk my life to the text; as the Greek word the New Testament translates as “life” suggests, I risk losing my *psyche*, my mind or soul. In a rather immediate sense that’s what I do when I read a sentence like “After I had killed Altmann . . .”: I give place to the verbal syntactic alphabetic traces of someone else’s—in this case an imagined someone else’s—mind, and behind that the mind of the author who imagined that someone else. And in so doing I may find my mind again. I may to my horror discover, as Scott discovered in his dream, that I have a will to murder, that I have a will to bash the faces of women. God help me, I do not want that will. But as Scott said, I am a man, and I know how men are socialized in my culture. I may discover that I am subject to perverse sexual longing. Maybe reading is that dangerous. As a teacher at BYU, I have never tried to minimize to my students the dangers of reading.

Yet I am always I, and reading I may also find again that besides willing to kill I also will to save, will to understand the killer, will a lot of things I might not have known so keenly before I lost my mind or my life in a story. Jesus was emphatic about this: if I try to save my life or my *psyche*, I will lose it. I elided a “for my sake” in that quotation, yes; but I think that will only make the point more emphatic: how, as a reader, shall I lose my life for Jesus’ sake in a story? If, as I read, I read for his sake, will I have a mind to kill or a mind to heal? That was a question, recall, that he asked the Pharisaic scribes on one occasion: “Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?” (Mark 3:4); as on an earlier occasion in the same town he asked them which was “easier,” “to say . . . Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk?”

(Mark 2:9). How in his name and for his sake shall we read?

Moral to Read, Moral to Write

Brian Evenson

I want to make a short statement, and then I'll try to respond to the statements others have made. Then I hope we can open this to a broader discussion.

First, I do believe that *Altmann's Tongue* is a moral book. It is a moral book for me to read and a moral book for me to write. However, everyone has to answer the question of the book's morality for himself or herself. I also believe that it's a book that is not without ambiguity. In fact, I think the strength of the book lies in the openness of the field it creates. It presents situations in which the reader is forced to bring his or her moral context to bear. In that sense, it does not ensure any specific response on the part of a reader, which, I think, is very close to the freedom that God gives us in this life.

There is a risk involved, but I feel the risk is well worth taking. Though I know both of people who have come away from *Altmann's Tongue* feeling the book has had real value in making them think through their culture and also those who have been shocked and indignant (and I think a moral response has been provoked even in that case), I know of nobody who has come away from the book with more tolerance for or inclination toward violence.

If anything, the book reveals to people the horror of violence and does so in a way that does not allow them to enjoy the violence itself. Much of the violence in the book is left out, clipped off, passed over quickly. The descriptions are minimalist. The passage Susan read is, I think, about as far as it goes.

Second, I have found that in this culture—in which I grew up and which I adore—people would much rather be told what to think than to make moral judgments for themselves; and I think that this is also the case in how many Mormons think about literature. To be confronted with situations without being told what to think about them

—which is what I do—is truly unsettling. My assumption is that all of you have a moral code that you go through life armed with and that you are able to interpret what is put before you in a book in the same way you would interpret events in life. A book should be an opportunity to exercise your moral imagination or your moral will. This society, which often puts a premium on blind obedience, often finds this kind of openness particularly painful. Yet I feel that this kind of openness is, perhaps for that very reason, particularly necessary.

I agree with Susan, who said in her AML presidential address: "It seems to me a serious cultural weakness and absolute anathema to the gospel of Jesus Christ that so many Mormons, like so many 1930s Germans, are willing to turn over their powers of moral reasoning to their leaders" (1). By creating a space, as I do in *Altmann's Tongue*, I'm demanding that readers take back to themselves their power of moral reasoning and make a judgment without being told in advance what to think. One reader, most unwilling to do so, has chosen to write an anonymous letter to a General Authority, appealing that he make me stop doing what I'm doing and cut off the challenge to the reader's moral judgment. However, in a culture in which the associate of a religious leader, as we know from a recent case, tries to excuse the leader for picking up a prostitute by saying that his resistance was weakened by having to watch some videos for possible violations of pornography laws,¹ it is often easy to be a person looking for excuses to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions. I almost expect to find a religious or secular official blaming his moral failings on the fact that he was asked, in his official capacity, to read *Altmann's Tongue*. It's much easier to lay the blame for our actions on others rather than to take responsibility for them ourselves.

I think *Altmann's Tongue* is a Mormon text as well in that it could be written only by someone from this culture. It comments on social issues that go far beyond Mormonism but which are exacerbated in the local culture. I don't want to be misunderstood here. I believe that our local culture has many positive aspects and wonderful elements

as well as some tendencies which I find dismaying. It's no coincidence that so many of the stories have connections to Nazi and post-Nazi Germany, in that I see similar problems of obedience and a similar unwillingness to think about what is going on around us to be common to Mormonism as well. Mormonism has been extremely insistent on looking at the happy side of life, at putting on a happy face—which is, to a certain extent, admirable. But it is not admirable when such insistence on looking at the good begins to mask evil and allows evil to continue to operate—when, for instance, because we don't want to think about sexual abuse, we hush it up, avoid prosecution of the offender, and allow many sexual criminals enough room that they can continue in their actions. There is in Mormon culture and even among faithful Mormons every atrocity that can be found in the larger culture. Further, these atrocities are often perpetuated by our attitudes and the attitudes of our religious leaders toward them.

So the stories in *Altmann's Tongue* are, in one sense, very distant from the Mormon world; but in another sense, they are very close to it. It's no secret that the story, "The Father, Unblinking," was written in part as a response to a BYU professor's interpretation of a BYU policy. At BYU, the rule is that you cannot tell anyone your salary. Some people take this as a kind of religious responsibility because BYU is a Church school. I happened to know a professor when I was growing up who took this policy so seriously that he felt he could not tell his own wife his salary. He kept that salary a secret from her by opening a separate bank account, depositing his pay check in it, and then transferring some of the money over to their joint account, in slightly different amounts every time, so that she could never try to guess how much he was actually making. This was a nice man, someone with good intentions. However, because of the way he has chosen to interpret a policy and endow it with a kind of religious power and responsibility, he has ended up creating what I feel is a monstrosity. I began to think with "The Father, Unblinking," how this man might react to the death of his own child and how he might try to hush that up or keep his wife from knowing about it. This idea

formed the basis of the story.

This story also, I think, is at least in part the result of an outsider's view of the way in which BYU handled the case of Cecilia Konchar Farr and my own struggle to understand my stance on that situation. There are also other elements that formed the genesis of the story, some of them much more positive. I think it's no coincidence that the serial killer that Susan has introduced us to in "Her Other Bodies" sings a Mormon hymn, although I find it quite revealing that certain people could become more indignant at the fact that he sings a hymn than at his being a serial killer.

Several of my recent pieces, including "Blessing the Dog" (see following article, "Contemporary Mormon Literature," with accompanying stories), are set much more clearly in Mormon culture. I have another story called "The Polygamy of Language," which is much like that, and I'm working on a piece called "Father of Lies," which addresses sexual abuse in Mormon culture.

I've had, in addition to the anonymous letter, a great many comments from others about *Altmann's Tongue*. I've had comments from those who have written about child abuse, who have indicated that they find real strengths in the book in revealing something that has to be revealed. Such abuse is, I admit, something very difficult to look at. I don't expect that everyone would want to look at it or would need to look at it. I think that perhaps, if the situation could change, you could make a book like this obsolete; but right now, it's necessary.

I've had comments as well from those who were abused. Many have found the book productive, though I, myself, would have very great difficulty reading *Altmann's Tongue* under such terms. I recently received a letter from a father who admitted to being physically abusive and spoke of the book as something which, in the last stages of his repentance, helped him both to see the full extent of what he had been unwilling to admit he was and to disassociate himself from it in a way that had not been possible before.

But perhaps my most gratifying comment came when a former bishop told a friend that he'd been

horrified by "The Munich Window" because he saw himself and the way he'd served as bishop reflected there. It made him remember a time during his tenure as bishop when he'd been involved in some excommunications that had been questionable; it made him reconsider and regret his actions, and made him realize that, in his ecclesiastical capacity, he was closer to the maddened father of the story than he would ever want to admit. It is extremely easy to justify, in the name of the sanest ideals, the most insane actions. No one, including our leaders, is a moral exception; and I will always contend that the more of our leaders, religious or otherwise, and the more of us generally who realize this the better.

Finally, as should be obvious from the fact that I'm leaving BYU, I believe that serious writers cannot let their concerns be dictated to them by people who know nothing about literature or who want literature to toe the party line. The sort of literature BYU administrators want, as far as I can tell, is the literary equivalent of approved Communist literature. I think Susan has a much more subtle response to the book and one that needs to be addressed. I want to make it clear that I'm not including her in this statement.

Writing is not an institutional matter. It is most often outside of, or even opposed to, institutions; and in spite of what I've said, the very gratifying responses I believe the book has received in this culture, and my belief that the book is ultimately tied to morality, I think of myself not as a Mormon writer but as a writer plain and simple, writing for a much larger audience, writing ultimately for everyone. Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera said that either you are a writer or you are not. If you are a writer for a particular race, creed, religion, or nationality, if your writing must be propped up by some adjective, you are no writer at all (3). I have great hope that someday—and someday soon—the adjective "Mormon" in front of "literature" in the phrase "Mormon literature" and "Mormon writer" will become expendable. But I also suspect that the writers who will bring Mormon writing into national literature are not likely to be the same people that are lauded and accepted at a local level.

Now, in terms of some of the comments made on this panel, I do appreciate Susan's response. When I initially wrote this book, I felt that it would probably be a very difficult book for women to read, but the responses to the book have not really borne that out. I've found that as many women as men either seem to like it or dislike it. Susan raises some challenging issues. One is the way in which literature should inform life and the way in which literature should help us change our life. I do not see literature as something which exists in a void or vacuum. I see it as very much a part of life. I do agree that we have to think of ways of resolving conflict without promoting violence. I would suggest that I am doing something that is simply the other half of Susan's argument in that I show in my stories that trying to resolve conflict through violence is hopeless. The idea of Susan's, that we simply present alternatives to violence, will not, I feel, turn those who are prone to violence away from violence. In that sense, perhaps, I am appealing to those who are not ready for her alternative, trying to show them how fatal and feeble the course they are pursuing has become and trying to warn the rest of us against those who have followed the course of violence long enough to be almost unredeemable.

Susan also talks about the work of literature creating a moral world. I agree with this as well; but it seems strange to me that, with her insistence on the social qualities of literature, she would try to see the moral world as self-contained. I believe that the writer and the reader are always participating in the work. If the work does not provide alternatives, then your own mind and your own experience will provide alternatives. Works do not exist on their own. They exist in connection with the mind of the reader and in conjunction with its readers. A work is nothing without a reader.

MARNI: I'd like to begin with a question that I hope will maximize some of the diversity on this panel. Speaking as the other woman on this panel, my reaction is more consistent with Susan's than with anyone else's. I want to note that Susan is the only person who actually read from the text. (Clauses don't count, Bruce.) I think that's signifi-

cant. I think we're seeing here a gap between the text and the theory. It's important to gauge the reaction that I perceived from the audience as Susan read from that text. I think that reaction is different from the highly specialized theory that we hear from the members of the panel. Reactions like Susan's tend to get categorized among academics as naive and unsophisticated. I don't think that's fair. Brian himself has just finished defending his work in terms of its positive impact on several people. Thus, it's clear that Brian sees the value of his work, at least partly, in terms of how it was able to inform morally these people. I think we have to try to explore that question. Brian clearly feels that his literature should do something. Susan asserts that the literature (or at least the passage she read) verges on the pornographic; and the question is: Do we really defend it with the theory that we've been presenting here today?

BRIAN: I think to do any kind of justice to a story, you have to read the whole story. To present a bit of the work out of context—admittedly, it's a difficult work and contains elements that many of you would find disgusting—is the same kind of tactic that censors use. I think it makes no sense to talk about an individual passage. I think it makes more sense to read the full story in context.

BRUCE: I will demur slightly. I think it does make sense to talk about individual passages. *BUT* you've got to pay very close attention to them, and Susan was doing some of that; I was trying to do that with a very short clause. When Susan came in, she said unhappily, "I'm going to be mean, and I don't like to be mean." I would agree that, in a way, Susan's rhetoric, for such a gentle person, had a certain violence in it—to wrench a certain page out of context and talk about it. I think Susan's question on "Her Other Bodies" is very trenchant: What is a woman supposed to *do* with that story? Yet for her to say "there is nothing for a woman to do" with that passage she read was manifestly undercut by what she did with it. That's one thing a woman can do with it. That's one thing a male feminist can do it. A male feminist can look very hard at that passage and say, "What I see here is

the anatomy of male violence against women."

It's certainly true that very few of the women in this book are "role models" (and Susan knows that I would say that's a pretty inadequate way to treat characters in fiction). But there is Marion le Goff in "The Evanescence of Marion le Goff" (131-34). That may be the only thing a woman in this fearsome world can do. That's very sad, and I, too, hope that Brian would work his way toward more hopeful stories. But these are stories about violence as a dead end; and to me, they are somatically convincing. When I read "Her Other Bodies," I know what it feels like *in my body* to be a serial killer—and I hate it. I do not want to be that.

Now, I may want to say, "Damn you, Brian, for making me feel that." In fact, I don't. Brian grew up a few houses up the street from me. I don't pretend to have known him well when he was a child, and I don't remember him torturing dogs or cats.

Insofar as I have a theory, it wants to be a theory about what happens to me or Susan or anybody else morally, aesthetically, somatically, when we read sentences in a story. "After I had killed Altmann . . ." Or "He drove across the border, crossed into the barren northern stretches of Utah. Three miles into the state he killed his first, bashing her eyes in with his tire iron" (145). You see, the same thing happens there, slightly dilated and spread out, given the difference between first and third person, that happens to me as a reader of "Altmann's Tongue."

I'm willing to formally identify with the pronoun "he," and third person allows me a little more space (I'm not too likely to wake up thinking I am the narrator of "The Munich Window"); but by the time I get to "he killed his first," once again, for me as a reader, a commandment has been invoked by the word "killed," and I say: "No, you do not do that!" As I go on, I'm horrified and my experience of this story exists always in that tension between my necessary involvement with the sentences as I read them, which is partly somatic, and my moral disapproval of so many of the acts they depict (including those Susan read), with very good reason on every page. The woman

whose murder Susan quoted is the one other character in this story who says to this demented man, "You need a rest." It's her ordinary, everyday, truck-stop, convenience-store-clerk compassion on this guy which makes his murder of her so horrifying. She's an ordinary, decent human being who says to a stranger turning up, "You need a rest." And he kills her with a *tire* iron. (Maybe it's a little too crude of Brian to make puns like that.)

To respond to Marni, insofar as I do have a theory, it wants to be about what's happening as I read.

SUSAN: Bruce said he learned, from "Her Other Bodies," what it was like to be a serial killer. Well, I learned what it was like to be serially killed. Again and again and again. Forgive me—this is an angry response—I'm glad men are going to learn to stop being violent, but must they murder and torture and pulp women's bodies to learn it? I really wish they could confront their violence in some other artistic way than by destroying women. (Applause)

MARNI: I'd like to respond to Brian's comment. I think it's a form of violence to suggest that it's using censor's tactics when I suggest that portions of text are meaningful. We are literary scholars on this panel. We use portions of text to describe overall textual experience. It's apparently not objectionable when we're praising a text to quote only portions.

BRIAN: We use portions of text to respond to the text as a whole. The one thing that's often seen as negative in literary criticism is when you take a passage out of context—and I don't think Susan is doing that—but I do think that those passages may give you a harsher idea of the story than you'd have if you read it, even though it is a harsh story.

SUSAN: I don't think so. Read any page of that story.

BRUCE: Read the whole story. Read the pages in sequence, the sentences in sequence. It's still a

very harsh story. You'd rather watch the next rerun on *Nickelodeon*.

SUSAN: Brian said he's calling on readers to make their own judgments and makes an analogy to the way God works. God didn't put us down here with just bad examples and then tell us to learn how to act from those bad examples. I think literature has a great power to influence as well as to call forth a critical response. My natural way of reading is not to engage intellectually with the text. My natural way of reading is just to enter the text. "Reader response" literary theory supports that sense of the way we read. We can judge the text, but the text also has power to influence us. Just to put in a text a couple of decent people who aren't destroyed, to make a model of a world that isn't all negative, is not to force the reader to make a judgment about how to read. Good acts can be presented as impartially and objectively as bad acts. It seems to me that such a model would be better for creating a tension which calls for a possibility of choice rather than such a bleak and negative world. I don't think there is anyone healthy in any of Brian's stories. There are simply people who get victimized or people who are brutal. There are no models of health here for the reader to respond to.

BRIAN: I do agree with Susan that there is space for talking about good characters in literature. As my work develops, it's been changing in various ways; and one of those is that I'm more willing to look at characters who are closer to me in terms of values. The other thing, though, that I would say is that there *is* always someone good who is coming into the work, and that's the reader with his or her own values and that there is a real advantage to presenting a world in which the moral decisions that are made are going to have to be your own and where you feel that you're on your own. I agree again that God did not throw us down into this world without any help, but often, I think, we believe that we have more help than we actually have. At the same time, again through the reader, I think we bring that moral choice back. I still must insist that I see a text as something that consists of words on the one hand and

the reader on the other hand.

MARNI ASPLUND-CAMPBELL, a former member of BYU's English faculty, is currently working on a collection of essays, poems, and short stories about motherhood called *With Child*. Her essay "Pentecost, Gethsemane, Priesthood," appeared in the August 1995 issue of *Sunstone*, and her poetry has appeared in *Dialogue* and *Hip Mama*. Her husband, Greg, is a graduate student in music at the University of Washington in Seattle. They are the parents of three children.

SCOTT ABBOTT, an associate professor of German at BYU, who formerly taught at Vanderbilt University, is the author of *Immortal for Quite Some Time*, a book manuscript about the death of his brother from AIDS, which won the Utah Arts Council First Place Award for 1994. He and his wife, Susan Hansen Abbott, are the parents of seven children.

SUSAN ELIZABETH HOWE, 1995 President of the Association for Mormon Letters, is currently the poetry editor of *Dialogue* and a contributing editor of *Tar River Poetry*. Her poems have appeared in *Shenandoah*, *The New Yorker*, *Southwest Review*, and other journals; she is currently working on her first collection of poetry.

B. W. JORGENSEN, a past president (1990) of the Association for Mormon Letters, is an associate professor of English at Brigham Young University. He has published poetry, criticism, and fiction, for which he has received awards from the *Ensign*, *Sunstone*, *Literature and Belief*, AML, and the Utah Arts Council. He and his wife, Donna, are the parents of eight children and the grandparents of four. He says: "The telling and hearing of stories has been the main study of my life since childhood. I have begun to perceive that everything I have written thus far is a long, intermittent exploration of the LDS scriptural declaration that 'the spirit and the body are the soul of man.' As a Mormon literary critic, I hope to do the works of Abraham who, among other things, waited at the door of his tent to welcome strangers and pleaded with Yahweh to spare Sodom for the sake of even ten righteous persons."

BRIAN EVENSON has a double Ph.D. in critical theory and creative writing from the University of Washington in Seattle. He was hired as a member of BYU's English faculty in January 1994, has published a first novel, *Altmann's Tongue* (New York: Knopf, 1994) and has a second, *Dark Property*, under consideration by a national publisher. After an anonymous complaint about *Altmann's Tongue*, BYU's president and its provost warned him that a second similar work would not be considered appropriate for a BYU faculty member. Brian, technically on leave from BYU for 1995-96, is currently an associate professor of English at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater. He and his wife, Connie, are the parents of two children.

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Notes

1. B. Lloyd Poelman, then a senior partner in the Church's law firm of Kirton, McConkie, and Poelman and president of Monument Park North Stake (Salt Lake City), pled guilty in the fall of 1994 "to the class B misdemeanor charge [of patronizing a prostitute]." He was fined \$750, ordered to complete a counseling program, to provide twenty hours of free legal work to the community, and to undergo an AIDS test. In exchange for pleading as charged, the plea will be held in abeyance for one year. If he has no similar violations within that time, "the charge will be dismissed." Poelman chaired "the now-defunct Citizens for Positive Community Values," a group begun about ten years ago "with pornography as a major issue." The news report did not say when the group became defunct. According to former committee member Darlene Hutchison, Poelman "had to habitually view videos to make decisions. It probably led to his downfall." She suggested that "sexual addiction is a real risk of viewing such material and she likened Poelman to 'a general killed in the field. . . . Sometimes those leading the fight fall victim. He may have saved others from the same fate.'" Poelman was also the co-chair of the Statewide Task Force on Child Sexual Abuse, until it was dissolved in 1992. Stephen Hunt, "Lawyer Pleads Guilty in Prostitution Case," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 3 December 1994, B-3.

The Struggle for Mormon Literature

Brian Evenson

Before I begin to speak more specifically about my own fiction and to read to you from it, I want to talk about the state of Mormon literature and criticism and about the changes that I feel must occur if Mormon literature expects to find a place in the national literature. We are, I feel, in a transitional period, a period in which Mormon writers are making decisions about whether to enter the national literature in such a way that they will be considered a serious force, in such a way that their work will not collapse when exposed to criticism from outside of Mormon culture. The question that motivates my discussion is a question that I have heard asked, in many different ways, in regard to my own fiction lately: Can Mormons be part of a broader national literature and still maintain and express their values? Can they write contemporary fiction that is consonant with work occurring in the broader national spectrum and still be writing truly "Mormon literature"?

I would like to think that the answer is yes: indeed, that it is precisely by actively participating in and establishing a dialogue with a broader literature that Mormon writing becomes worthwhile. This dialogue is absolutely essential. To remain insular is to surrender the possibility of writing more than a local literature and, I think, to compromise the complexity and power of one's moral vision.

There have been some suggestions made as of late that Mormon authors should refuse to participate in the broader literary space. Beginning with Richard Cracroft, the idea has been expressed among certain critics that

modern Mormon criticism . . . is unsettled and uncentered, too prone to follow Corianton a-whoring across distant and exotic horizons after the shallow attractions of blind secularism, visionless and perverse fault-seeking, skeptical and compromising humanism, and hearkening to Babylon's glib but hollow and faithless

voices. . . . Too many of our modern writers and critics . . . have bound themselves to the literary masts of the world rather than orthodoxy, and become "like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed" (James 1:6). ("Attuning" 38)

Mormon authors, it has been suggested to me, have a "responsibility" to write work that is not disturbing, that will not make other Mormons uncomfortable. They must affirm in a straightforward fashion. Mormon writers have, I have been told, a responsibility to promote Mormon values.

Such attitudes have been too often used by Mormon writers and critics as an excuse to remain unaware of trends in contemporary fiction. Some of those who are partly aware of current fiction have come to feel, because of talk of responsibility, that they should reject contemporary trends out of hand, that they should turn away from the contemporary literature which might be most useful to them because it helps them escape their mold. Indeed, they are told that they should be writing a sort of fiction which is primarily mimetic and which affirms the good, old-fashioned values of the Victorian era. I have found that many Mormons see the aesthetic of Mormon culture as firmly rooted in the nineteenth century and believe that Mormon writers should be willing to satisfy that aesthetic. It is not a question, they believe, of asking writers not to write good literature, but of asking them to write differently, to return to a previous and "more appropriate" aesthetic.

Yet to "write differently" under these terms is often to sacrifice the chance of being heard nationally. Indeed, much of the criticism and so-called "encouragement" given to Mormon writers by teachers at Mormon universities and colleges and by other Mormons is severely limiting and does much to ensure that the writer will remain local and narrow in his or her concerns. We should be wary of arguments which champion Mormon literature for what it has to offer that other literature does not, for too often these arguments are

proscriptions and represent a refusal to pay any attention to the broader world of literature. Indeed, the "encouragement" that Mormon writers have been given to write in a way that expresses their beliefs on a surface level is a means of trying to standardize literary expression, of trying to make literature safer by expressing beliefs in ways that do not challenge our moral values.

It is my belief that as Mormons we are always writing differently in a much more profound way than such arguments advocate. We write differently almost without effort—and perhaps we do it best when we are least conscious of it. For this reason I think it is wise of Orson Scott Card to have resolved never to "attempt to use my writing to overtly preach the gospel in my 'literary' works" (12). And for the same reason I feel that the "gently dogmatic art" that Cracroft advocates ("Nephi" 15), whatever its advantages might be as a teaching tool, if any, is likely to be less successful in literary terms. As Card suggests, "The most powerful effects of a work emerge from those decisions that the writer did not know he or she was making" (12). Mormon writers who write in contemporary modes, whether they write work that is identifiably Mormon or not, are *always* infusing their work with their beliefs; they cannot help but do so. Even if they resist doing so on the surface, the beliefs will make themselves manifest in subtle ways.

I think it worthwhile to analyze a statement Ed Geary made almost twenty years ago in "The Poetics of Provincialism." Says Geary, "It is one thing to ask the artist to put his religious duties before his literary vocation or to write from his deepest convictions. It is quite another to insist that he create from a base in dogma rather than a base in experience" (qtd. in England "Dawning" 15). Yes, it is different, but the difference is not as vast as Geary would have us believe. Good writers, I would argue, are always writing from their deepest convictions: they cannot help but do so. There is no point in asking the Mormon artist to put his religious duties before his literary vocation when he writes because, finally, in the act of writing, the two are inseparable. Vocation and belief interact in the writing with such complexity

that to attempt to bring one to the surface will ruin the balance of the piece, will simplify and falsify the relation, will bring the piece one step closer to propaganda.

To feel that one must "ask the artist to put his religious duties before his literary vocation" instead of simply trusting his ability to write naturally and unconsciously from his beliefs, says, I think, several things about the relation of the Mormon reader/critic to the Mormon writer. First, there is an implied belief that the artist is irresponsible, that if he is not reminded of his duties he will fail to fulfill them. Second, if one is to ask the artist to favor his religious duties over his literary vocation, one must ask who is to determine the "true convictions" in the author's work and separate the true from the false. It suggests a belief that readers and critics, as individuals, occupy a position from which a judgment can be made for others, from which they can determine for others and the author himself if the project is appropriate. It is a short step from here to the censorship of experiences and views that the reader and critic define as "false."

Literary work, however, is ambiguous, always enmeshed in interpretation. It becomes in practice very difficult to make an even contingently "universal" judgment about a piece of literature and about the way in which the author's belief is or is not manifest in that piece of literature. We cannot definitively and for all time say what Shakespeare's plays mean; rather we simply provide tentative interpretations, understanding as we do so that this interpretation is preceded and followed by other interpretations and never stands absolutely above them or separate from them. Even if an interpretation within a certain community might seem to dominate for a number of years, there is in good literature no such thing as a definitive and final interpretation. Indeed, the literary establishment will often view a work in radically different terms from one generation to the next, will even reverse its estimation of particular works—Shakespeare's work being one case in point, Melville's *Moby Dick* being another. In this sense, true literature proves very resistant to institutional appropriation and, because of its fluidity, remains a potentially dan-

gerous challenge to institutional thought and dogma.

The problem in Mormonism is that since we feel that we have the one true church we often want to feel that we have the one true literary criticism as well—that there are certain things we should find in good literature, certain things the work should teach us. Underlying a good part of Mormon criticism and literature is a belief that we can “speak truly” (England “Dawning” 13) about Mormon experience and that this truth is unitary, a truth with a capital “T”. And as long as this monumentalism remains dominant, we will have very few good writers accepted within the culture.

If we, like Geary, insist upon asking the artist to “put his religious duties before his literary vocation or to write from his deepest convictions” we must ask who is to determine the proper means of putting one’s religious duties first in a work of fiction. Who is to determine what it means to write from one’s deepest convictions, and who is to decide how these convictions should be manifest in fiction? Who is to judge?

The answer, I think, is that nobody can make such a judgment except on a tentative and local level. Even the writer, faced by his own text become independent of him, must constantly be revising his opinion of the work through interaction with other opinions and through continued reading and writing.

But this is not the answer that Mormon criticism has given. Take, for instance, Eugene England’s direct elaboration on Geary in his seminal essay “The Dawning of a Brighter Day.” Says England, “Though it is illegitimate and destructive to insist that a writer create from dogma rather than experience, it might well be legitimate and valuable to ask him, as I think the Church properly does, to put his religious duties before his literary vocation and write from his deepest convictions” (15).

The implication here is that it is the Church’s right to ask and, by implication, to determine and judge the convictions of the writer and the expression of his convictions in a piece of writing. At some level for England (though not so much in his recent work), Mormon literature seems ultimately

judged not by literary critics but by the Church, and any valid Mormon criticism must derive from this spiritual ground. He has stated even recently that “central Mormon ideas,” such as the fact that Mormons believe they are gods in embryo, are what will create and nourish great Mormon literature (“Dawning” 459), and he seems in this sense to believe that the best Mormon literature will operate in obvious accord with the central Mormon ideas. Such a belief reveals a partial assumption that there is a proper way to express conviction: indeed, later in “The Dawning of a Brighter Day,” England discusses “the challenge of *properly* relating scholarship and artistic achievement to moral character or religious faith” (17; emphasis mine) and quotes Church leaders’ specifications of what Mormon art should be. In this essay and elsewhere, England advocates an aesthetic that springs from Mormon theology and which writes in affirmation of the “metaphysical possibilities and paradoxes” (11) of the religion. Even if he is not “proposing a formal creed for Mormon writers” (12), England does much to suggest that the Mormon writer’s work should be an *obvious* extension of belief in the Church and of Mormon theology. But where does this leave writers who are inactive Mormons or writers whose understanding of the theology is not complete or writers who choose for whatever reason to turn away from the obvious manifestations of that theology? Obviously, if we pursue the analogy (and England wisely does not), they are the fallen and are in a sense blind: they should be “encouraged” to come back into the true fold.

England’s admonition has been met by far too many Mormon authors in ways that I believe England himself would not advocate: with an attempt to make Mormonism evident on the surface of the work rather than in the structure—to make sure by the time the first paragraph is over that Mormonism and things Mormon have been name-dropped to let the reader know this is a Mormon story.

Mormon literature (like many members of the Church) has remained on the whole more interested in appearing Mormon than in being Mormon—it takes the small risks of window dressing

rather than the large ones of self-re-creation from the inside out. Mormon literature has remained and still does remain "too timid, too narrowly conventional. It has been satisfied with the safe middle ground of experience and with the non-risk-taking authorial voice" (England, "Progress," 457). Indeed, a heavy-handed insistence on Mormonism on a surface level is often indicative of a lack of Mormon bedrock far below the surface.

Mormon literature and criticism which insist on the religion's right to interpret what valid expressions of "true convictions" in literature are, will be dogmatic and will never fully be literature. It is a dire mistake, I believe, to let those whom we admire and respect as fellow Mormons and as our religious brothers, sisters, and leaders dictate our aesthetic for us. Indeed, perhaps the most serious problem with Mormon literature and criticism is that it has been too willing to let those who know very little about art determine its aesthetic. Even in the phrase "Mormon literature," we must not forget that the word *Mormon* is an adjective, a modifier of a substantive. Too often it threatens to become a noun, to make the word *literature* the adjective. When this happens we begin to praise as literature nonliterary works like Gerald Lund's *The Work and the Glory* while passing over other work because it is not obviously Mormon. In the phrase "Mormon literature," emphasis must be on the literature.

Otherwise what we have is little more than local color. Literature is shaped out of local color through a painful process of transgressing literary codes conjoined with an increasingly complex rewriting and restabilization of the social and ethical code. Literature is a potential challenge to all institutions, to our sense of ourselves, but it can be a very productive challenge. As Karl Keller has suggested, "A great work of *Mormon* literature will be like all great works of literature; it will be one that makes me wrestle with my beliefs and which stimulates me by the example of the author's own effort to re-create my own life on surer grounds of belief" (19). If these rethinkings and rewritings are not allowed, we will have great difficulties being able to reach the surer and more satisfying grounds of belief.

Let me add that, if we are to reach this ground, we cannot remain stolidly athwart past aesthetics, either as critics or as writers, for such aesthetics are not likely to lead us to the kinds of challenges we need. We need to make ourselves aware of what is occurring in contemporary literature and aesthetics and learn how elements of these fields might be used to help us create an effective literature.

We create an intellectual dilemma by too readily equating Mormon literature with a nineteenth-century aesthetic, one which, if it is followed, ensures that most of our work will feel dated to those outside of our immediate culture. But are our values really Victorian? Is there anything that demands we take a nineteenth-century aesthetic except for a prejudice against contemporary aesthetics which is based on our fear of the unknown and a nervousness about losing what we feel makes us Mormon writers?

Past aesthetics are often easier to understand than a developing aesthetic, simply because they are already mostly fixed, their rules already established. Through time, the transgressions that once-developing aesthetics effected against previous aesthetics have come to seem both tame and correct. We have learned ways in which to read texts that participate in this aesthetic which make them seem nonthreatening—a case in point being the gradual domestication of Shakespeare (particularly *Macbeth*).

But good writers do not fit into a past aesthetic. They demand that the aesthetic recreate itself to fit them. Good writers won't go comfortably into a box, even a religious box. Indeed, it means something quite different for Flannery O'Connor to be a Catholic writer than it does for most Mormon writers to be Mormon writers. Even though O'Connor is often used by Mormon critics as proof that writers with Christian values can make it, the way in which she approached the act of writing and publishing is never mentioned. O'Connor never wrote for a Catholic audience—she wrote from the first for a national audience. She did not publish her work with a Catholic press but with a national press. Her work is composed of scenes and situations that have very little in common with other "Catholic" writers.

She was written about not by Catholic critics but by national critics; and for several years after her first books appeared, her religious links were not widely recognized by critics, who accepted her for reasons apart from her Catholicism. Indeed, Catholics and Catholicism rarely make any appearance at all in her work, and if, say, one of the seven sacraments does appear, it is often in twisted form: for instance, in *The Violent Bear It Away*, she has a baptism and a drowning become two sides of the same act. She says things like—and these are things that tend to get passed over by Mormons who refer to O'Connor for justification—"writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable" (805) and "To look at the worst will be for [the writer] no more than an act of trust in God" (810). In this, she is braver than any Mormon I know—she is comfortable enough with her beliefs that she is not afraid to portray the grotesque surfaces of the world.

Asks Eugene England, along a similar vein, "Does it count against Dostoyevsky that he was consciously, even self-consciously, Russian?" ("Dawning" 7). No, but this is because, again, Dostoyevsky's idea of what it means to be Russian is radically different from our idea of what it means to be Mormon. As critic Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, Dostoyevsky has enough confidence in his ability as an artist that, instead of trying to impose a correct reading or dogma, he opens the literary space up to such a degree that his own opinions are caught up with the often divergent opinions of the characters rather than elevated above them. Says Bakhtin,

Dostoyevsky . . . creates not voiceless slaves . . . but *free* people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him.

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoyevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a *plurality*

of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. (6; emphasis his)

Again, such an act of creation is a function of an immense and almost dizzying bravery, a confidence in one's ability and in one's readers which has, I am afraid, been too often lacking in Mormon writers and readers though it might well be the foundation of all great literature. Bakhtin is able to make the case for seeing the same experience for Shakespeare and other great artists. If we are to be effective Mormon writers, we might do well to learn from Dostoyevsky to be willing to stop thinking of our belief as an umbrella that stretches over the whole world of the artistic creation. Better to think of ourselves as participants in the world that we have created and to let other participants speak in their own voices. If that means revealing a world that is uncomfortable and unstable, so be it.

I realize that this essay may take a more extreme position than some of you may be comfortable with. I'll be glad to discuss it after I read you two stories: "Killing Cats" and "Blessing the Dog."

By way of introduction to my fiction, I've said repeatedly as the controversy over my fiction has gone on that my fiction is quite frankly moral fiction and that it puts readers in a position where they're often drawn specifically to think about their own values, including their own complicity in certain acts. In that sense, precisely because it is moral fiction, it can be very difficult to read. What I'm trying to demand is that we look at ourselves in ways that might not always be pleasant.

When I was visiting some relatives in California for a weekend, they decided to get rid of their cats. The cats had been their pets for a long time but were irritating my relatives by climbing up on the table and eating the food there and getting into everything. I wanted to say, "Well, maybe if you actually cleared the table in the hour or two after dinner, the cats wouldn't get up there and eat the food."

I'm not sure why they decided that this weekend, the weekend we had come to visit, was the weekend they were going to kill the cats. I was

surprised and somewhat shocked at the casual announcement. I'd always thought of disposing of animals as a very unkind thing to do. Furthermore, I assumed that, because it was unkind, people would be ashamed of it and would do it privately so that no one would know about it. I didn't quite know what to think. The husband loaded the cats into the car, then came back in and said, "Oh, would you like to drive with me to the pound?" in the tone of voice he would have used to invite me along on a picnic. I like cats. I have a cat myself. I didn't quite know what to say, so I said, "No, no, thanks. Thanks for offering, but I don't want to go."

That experience sat with me for a long time and partly resulted in "Killing Cats." No one in the story has a name but the cats. I did this on purpose, but there's an irony involved. In writing the story, I thought that I had deliberately changed the names of the cats so they'd be different. Then at the last minute, I had a sudden fear that I'd actually given the cats the names of my relatives' real cats, so I quickly changed them. But it turned out, by some weird Freudian mechanism, the changed names that I gave the cats were the actual names of the real cats.

KILLING CATS

They wanted to kill their cats, but the problem was the problem of transportation. They invited me to dinner to beg me to drive them and their cats out to the edge of town so that they, the cat killers, could kill their cats. There was no need for me to participate in the slaughter, they said, beyond driving, nor any need for me to watch them kill their cats. Probably it was better someone stayed in the car and kept the motor running, they said. They did not know what laws existed about people and their cats, about what people could inflict, legally speaking, on their own cats. Nevertheless, they assumed there were laws and statutes and ordinances, books and books of legalities concerning felines and their acceptable modes of death, they said. Laws and statutes and ordinances which, they informed me, they were prepared to break.

I did not much care to try my hand at cat

killing, but all I would have to do was to drive. I did not have to kill the cats. So I told them, yes, I would drive them, yes, as a token of friendship—if they would pay for gas. They said all right, they would pay, and introduced their cats to me. The mother Checkers, the female kitten Oreo, the male kitten Champ. They apologized for the banal names—although knowing what I knew about these cats I was hardly in a position to establish rapport. I would have preferred not to have known their names. Better that they be for me just "the cats." I was only the driver: all I knew, if questioned, was the road there and the road back from there, nothing about what occurred at the place itself. But the people insisted on telling me names, and once they told me they insisted on apologizing, telling me the cats' names weren't names the people personally would have chosen, but had been, they unfortunately insisted on telling me, the names their children had chosen.

The man went to the hall closet and rummaged out a gun and wads of stiff, filthy rags. He rubbed the gun down with the rags. He polished the gun up and, after sighting down the barrel at me, handed me the weapon.

"Think it can do the trick?" he said.

I held the gun a moment, for form's sake, before returning the gun to the man. I said, yes, it probably would.

The man pointed the gun at the dining room table, telling me how sometimes, when he saw the cats climb up there to lick the plates, he wanted to "blow their furry bodies right off the table." He had wanted to "blast the cats away" for quite some time, he said, Checkers most of all, he said, but Oreo and Champ were no exception. Tonight was the night, he indicated. He pointed the gun and made a sound so I would know what he meant.

I watched the woman wander on tiptoe down the hall, peeking through doorways. She came back into the kitchen, started picking up cats.

"Sound as angels," she said. "Let's be on our way."

"Slugs, honey?" the man said.

"Honestly, dear, I haven't the least," said the woman.

The man returned to the hall closet. He opened the closet, knelt down before it, thrust his hands in. He threw things out. He threw out metric wrenches and mason jars full of canned peaches, ski poles and winter coats and tangled scarves, Monopoly money and airplane glue and a milk-crusted glass. He surfaced with a fist-sized plastic box.

"Kids get to them?" the man said, holding the open box upside down, shaking it.

"Am I paid to watch them?" the woman said. "Honestly!"

Saved, I was thinking.

Not the cats—myself. I cared what happened to the cats only insofar as its happening affected me. Not that I have anything against cats, but people pay good money for their pets. They have a right to do what they want, as long as they leave me out of it.

"Perhaps the hardware store?" said the woman, looking at her watch. "Or Carl might."

"Charles? Jenkins, you mean? Old Chuck Jenkins?" the man said.

The man looked at the cats, spat into the shag rug.

"Cats like these are not worth the waste of lead," he said. "These three are dumpers."

The man demanded to know what I thought of the idea, the idea of dumpers, it being my car, me to be the one to get the ticket if things went awry. As long as he paid for gas and did the dumping himself, I told him, I was with him.

They sat in the back seat, stroking the cats, their faces fading in and out with the passing street lamps. The wife suggested it might be a nice gesture to give each cat a good solid crack with the pistol first, the butt end of it, for certainty's sake. It would be the kindest thing, she thought.

I told them please to wait until we were on the highway. There was no point in being premature.

There were three, they said to me, three cats, counting kittens as cats. They said they could not help noticing that there were three cats and three of us too, when they counted me.

I said, no, no need to include me, that was okay, not at all, but thank you, thank you, I really appreciate the offer, thank you for asking.

The cats screeched like power saws when they hit the pavement. I watched the man and the woman in my mirror, dropping cats. I kept watching afterward, watching them look out the rear window.

"Whoops," the man said. "Oh, no."

"What?" I said.

"Nothing," said the man.

"Awful," said the woman.

"Such a mess," said the man.

"Should have given them the smash," said the woman, hefting the pistol.

The man leaned forward, put his hand on my shoulder. He put his mouth close to my ear. I felt his warm breath.

"Drive back and finish them, buddy," said the man.

"It's the merciful thing," said the woman.

"Turn this rig around," the man said.

In the rearview mirror I watched what I could see of his face next to mine. He remained motionless, not speaking, the street lights flashing into and out of the car.

I kept driving.

"Be a friend to me in this," he said. He took the empty pistol from his wife and held the snout against my neck. "Aim for their skulls."

Author's commentary: If you want a story to be about something, this story is about moral responsibility. In that sense, I think it's very much a Mormon story. We're so obsessed in this culture about moral responsibility, at least on a surface level, yet often in our actions we're not willing to take responsibility. This story shows a pattern of complicity. As the narrator begins to get involved with the plan to kill the cats, he takes the position that it will be all right because he won't actually be doing the killing. He's just driving. Each step after that enmeshes him more and more until he's ultimately the person asked to do the killing.

Very often when I've read this story, people laugh at the very beginning, but then they stop. The mood gets more and more serious. I think the audience feels drawn in and begins to understand what the narrator is going through.

I have five or six stories that are identifiably

Mormon, but they're not Mormon in traditional ways. In "Sanctified, in the Flesh," three killers pose as the Three Nephites to help roadway motorists. It's a little bit about our occasional tendency to be gullible. I've also written "The Polygamy of Language," which is about a break-off polygamist group with which a narrator begins to get involved in strange ways.

"Blessing the Dog" is also a nontraditional Mormon story, and I hope that its unconventional elements won't offend you. It's a shorter version of a piece called "The Dog." It's based on an incident that took place in the farming community of Spanish Fork, Utah. In this particular family, which is somewhat unhappy, a man decides that he has the need and the right to bless his sick dog.

BLESSING THE DOG

He waited, but the dog didn't come.

He went back into the house. His wife was strapping on her brassiere, her skin spilling over where the strap was tight.

"Seen the dog?" he said.

"Hain't my dog," she said, grunting, closing the hooks.

He drew open the curtains, stared down into the dirt yard. He did not see the dog. He turned. His wife had clapped a shirt over her chest, was asking him didn't he care if the whole world saw her bare.

No, he did not. But he didn't say.

He went out. He went into the yard, called the dog by name. He whistled. He went into the kitchen, moved through it touching the pans and out, into the living room. His wife sat at the foot of the stairs, wriggling on her socks.

He went out before she saw him.

He looked behind the house, looked in the shed. He looked inside the barn.

He found her in the shadow of the corner of the barn, crouched and sad-eyed. He went to stroke her. She whined, backed into the hay. He came closer. She scrabbled her feet in the dirt, tried to run past him. He lunged, had her by the scruff of the neck, lifting her forepaws off the ground to push air.

He forced the dog to look into his eyes. The dog's eyes, he saw, were dark, crusted, waxing over. Pulling back the flap of the ear, he looked in. He grabbed hold of the dog's bottom jaw, forced it down, looked down the dark throat. He let the dog loose. She slunk back into the corner, curling her back away from him.

He went to the end of the drive, saw Morrison coming down the road, limping and huffing, his heavy bag on his shoulder. He went out to meet him, his wife on the porch behind, arms crossed, watching him.

Morrison saw him come, dropped the bag off his shoulder, waited for him. The other man took up the bag, Morrison following him as he carried it to the barn.

"Nice to see you, Karl," said Morrison.

"Where's the truck?" said Karl.

"Truck?" said Morrison. "Dead," he said.

Karl spat. "Mine too," he said.

"That a fact," said Morrison.

Karl dropped Morrison's bag and entered the barn. He pointed to the corner. Squinting, Morrison moved forward until he saw the glints of the dog's eyes.

"Had I known it was the dog I'd have brought the smaller bag," said Morrison.

Karl shrugged.

"Had I known it was a stinking dog I probably wouldn't have bothered to come at all."

"Should have asked," said Karl.

Morrison nodded. He rolled up his sleeves, moved into the corner. The dog snapped once at his legs. He darted in and, when the dog opened his mouth and came at his leg, hammered it atop the head with his fist. The dog stutterstepped, woozed.

He reached around and grabbed the dog by the scruff of the neck, lifting it off the ground, crushing it against his chest. Looking into the eyes, he shook his head. He looked in the ears. He prized open the mouth, moved the dog until a shaft of light through the rooftrap struck down into the throat.

"Stay away from the mouth," he said.

"Why is that?" said Karl.

"Common sense. You don't want to come

down with it, do you?" said Morrison.

He turned the dog over and pulled the hind legs wide, found the skinflap of the thigh thick with red blots and pussing over. He let the dog drop. It crawled back into the corner, tail between its legs.

"What she have?" said Karl.

"Hell, I don't know," said Morrison. "Probably something new."

"That good or bad?"

Morrison flattened his lips. "Few days, he'll be okay. Or he'll be dead."

"She," said Karl.

Morrison went outside, picked up his bag. He took Karl's money. He heaved the bag onto his shoulder, made his way down the road.

Karl went back onto the porch, sat beside his wife.

"What Morrison want?" she said.

"Dog was sick," he said.

"You called Morrison over a sick dog?" she said.

"It's my money," he said.

"What Morrison do for her?" she said.

"Didn't do nothing," he said. "Not a goddam thing."

She stiffened and glared, then stormed into the house without a word. He waited a minute, sighed, followed her in.

"What is it?" he said to her back.

"You know how I feel about cursing God," she said.

"I didn't mean nothing by it," he said.

She shook her head, hugged herself in her own broad arms, leaning her body backward toward him. He did not move forward to meet her. He went out onto the porch. He went into the barn, sat down as close to the dog as the dog would let him.

He heard his wife at the door, saw the light flicker as she crossed the opening and moved into the barn.

"What she have?" she said.

He shrugged. "Sick," he said.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

"Thought I'd bless her," he said.

"Bless it?" she said. "The dog? Lay hands?"

"She's sick, hain't she?" he said.

"It's a dog," she said.

"Don't make no different," he said. "God's creature, like us all."

"You never blessed me," she said.

"You never needed it," he said.

"I asked for it."

He shook his head. "You look okay to me now," he said. "You hain't dead. You didn't need it."

"I asked for it," she said. "The dog ask?"

He opened a cupboard. It was full of dishes, cracked plates. In the other room, he heard his wife talking into the telephone. He closed the cupboard, opened another, found it packed with dried goods.

He heard his wife hang up the telephone.

"Where's the olive oil?" he called.

She came into the kitchen. "Don't have none," she said.

"What we got?" he said.

"Everything but oil," she said.

He shook his head, went out to the shed. He opened the cab of the truck, pulled the seat forward, groping behind it until he had hold of a can of thirty weight. He set the can on the floor, punctured it with a rusty nail.

He laid his hands on the can, prayed to consecrate it.

His wife opened the shed door.

"Telephone," she said.

He finished the prayer and carried the can of motor oil in, set it upon the table.

"Hello?" he said.

"Karl?" the voice said. "Bishop here."

"Bishop," he said. "Hello."

"Wife says you've taken it into your head to bless a dog," said the bishop.

"Could be," Karl said.

"Don't make light of the holy, Karl," said the bishop.

"I hain't," Karl said. "I am a believer."

"Exercise of your priesthood wrongly does more harm than good," said the bishop.

"Nothing's wrong with it," Karl said. "It's my priesthood."

"It is God's priesthood," said the bishop.

"It's my dog," said Karl.

"Now, Karl, that hain't true. It is God's dog. He just loaned it out for a while."

Karl didn't say anything.

"First thing, blessing dogs," said the bishop. "Next comes polygamy and blood sacrifice."

Karl hung up the phone. He went outside. His wife was on the porch.

"Where you going?" she said.

"To bless the damn dog."

"Hain't the bishop told you not to?" she said.

"Hain't his business," Karl said. "Hain't yours neither."

"Don't you support your spiritual leader?" she said.

"I support him," he said.

"You don't obey him," she said.

He shrugged. "I go to church," he said. "I'm a believer."

She shook her head, went inside. He saw her through the window, picking up the telephone.

He went into the barn. The dog had crawled in under the heaped straw and was buried but for her muzzle. He set the can of motor oil down beside her. He reached slowly out, clamped his hands upon the muzzle. The dog shook her head and neck like a trapped snake. He dragged her out, hairy with straw.

Speaking the consecration, he poured the motor oil over her crown, watching it glob thick on her fur, roll down. She started to whimper. He moved to straddle her body. Sitting upon her back, he pressed her down.

Very slowly, he let her muzzle go. He brought away his hands, brought them down upon her head. He started to bless her.

The dog was shaking her head, whimpering, wriggling out from under him. He stated the dog's name, stated his priesthood, said to God he did what he did in the name of the Savior. The dog yelped, clawed the inside of his knee.

"Hell, hold still," he said, pushing her head to the ground with his palms.

She shook her head, roiled up dust. She wriggled out from under him until his hands were down between his legs, trying to hold onto her

ears.

She turned her neck hard, bit his palm. He cursed, let her go.

She fled to the other side of the barn, stood there with her haunches shivering. He saw his palm begin to bleed. He wiped the palm against his pants, moved toward the dog.

The dog was skittish, keeping the distance it could between them. He lunged at it, caught its tail, was bit a second time, a third. He let go.

He cornered the dog, grabbed it by the back of the neck. He pulled the dog all the way off the ground, held it away from his body as it twisted and snapped. He lugged it out of the barn, across the dirt yard, to the porch.

His wife turned her eyes toward him. She had been crying, he knew.

"Hold her while I bless her," he said.

"I hain't gone to hold her," she said.

"Hell you won't," he said. "I'm the head of the house. What I say goes."

She stood, went into the house. He followed her in.

"Get that stinking dog out of here," she said.

"Hold her," he said.

She ran up the stairs, slipped into the bathroom, latched the door. He pounded on the bathroom door, called to her through it. The dog too was calling for something.

He looked, saw his palms slick with his blood. The dog twisted, bit him again.

He dropped the dog, saw her skitter across the floor, down the stairs. He wiped his hands clean on the body of the door.

He went into the bedroom. Opening the cabinet, he took out his shotgun. He broke open the barrels, loaded them. He closed the breech.

He went outside, the blood drying on his hands sticking to the stock of the gun. He squinted into the sunlight. He whistled.

He ducked his head, entered the barn. Cocking back the triggers, he called the dog by name.

QUESTION-ANSWER PERIOD

QUESTION: Can you comment on how you see the stories in *Altmann's Tongue* as moral?

ANSWER: I think the stories are moral wheth-

er I want them to be or not. When I write them, I don't sit down and say, "By using the metaphor of killing cats, I'm going to show how, in subtle ways, we often give way to immoral temptations." Rather, because I'm a Mormon, an active Mormon, and very much a participant in the culture, these values come out naturally in the work. I never plan to teach a lesson, and I don't think that's the primary thing that goes on in stories.

My stories create a fairly open field. When I speak of my work as moral, I mean that it forces the reader to bring his or her own morality to bear on the stories. I think there are moral elements that sway decisions slightly toward certain ways of looking at the stories; but at the same time, it is fairly open. Moral decisions, in my opinion, should make you exercise your moral imagination; simply prescribing answers is moralistic.

QUESTION: What are your personal feelings about violence?

BRIAN: I'm completely opposed to violence. I don't own a gun. I'm in favor of gun control. I don't hunt. I never have. I've never been in a fight. I've never had anyone beat me up. As a boy, when I was hiking in the hills or biking beside the streets and found dead animals, it was always very moving to me. My grandparents are all living, and so are my aunts and uncles, although I lost a number of friends in car crashes when I was growing up.

Maybe violence is so foreign to me that it fascinates me. Growing up I watched a lot of violence on television and I used to love violent movies. At least part of the purpose behind the book—looking at it after the fact—was to try to work against the glamorization of violence that goes on in our culture. To do so, I present violence in a way that makes it impossible to seem heroic or glamorous. I can't explain it. Marilyn Brown, a writer friend, has had a number of violent and traumatic experiences in her life. She writes stories that are very calm and happy. Maybe the opposite is the case with me.

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(New York: Knopf, 1994), and has a second, *Dark Property*, under consideration by a national publisher. After an anonymous complaint about *Altmann's Tongue*, BYU's president and its provost warned him that a second similar work would not be considered appropriate for a BYU faculty member. Brian, technically on leave from BYU for 1995-96, is currently an associate professor of English at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater. He and his wife, Connie, are the parents of two children. "Killing Cats" is reprinted from *Altmann's Tongue* by permission of Alfred J. Knopf, Inc., and the author. "Blessing the Dog" is also forthcoming in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. This paper was presented at the Sunstone Symposium, August 1995, Salt Lake City.

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"I Do Remember How It Smelled Heavenly": Mormon Aspects of May Swenson's Poetry

Susan Elizabeth Howe

Any discussion of Mormon culture or doctrine in the poetry of May Swenson must begin with the caveat that Swenson, for virtually all of her adult life, was not a believing Mormon. She rejected Mormon doctrines and practices when she was in college, moved to New York City a few years after graduating from Utah State University, and never looked back. Nevertheless, she was raised in a devout Mormon family, her parents having emigrated from Sweden to live with the Saints. Swenson learned Mormon teachings at home and attended Mormon meetings weekly throughout her childhood and youth. She maintained lifelong affection for her parents and eight brothers and sisters, most of whom are practicing Mormons, and she occasionally came to Utah to visit them.

As a consequence of her family and upbringing, Mormonism shaped Swenson's attitudes and perceptions both consciously and unconsciously. And because Swenson's poetry seems to rise directly from her life experience—her interests, her study, her thought, her travels—she could not help but respond to Mormon culture and beliefs in some of her poems. In these clear-eyed observations—Swenson's poems are always clear-eyed observations—she responds favorably to some aspects of Mormon culture and Mormon doctrine, and she critiques and disapproves of other aspects. Her opinions are always strongly owned and strongly expressed. Such independence and firmness are not surprising when one considers Swenson's life. She had the courage to go to New York City as a twenty-three-year-old woman in 1935, live there in great poverty during the height of the depression so she could learn to write, and persevere in following her dream of becoming a poet although she didn't publish a poem for the next thirteen years. Such experiences developed in Swenson strong personal values and trust in her own

judgment, which attitudes inform her poetry.

Swenson's Critique of Mormon Culture

In her poems about aspects of Mormon culture, Swenson seems to handle the Mormon past with respect and affection and to look with a more critical eye at the contemporary Mormon world. Her memories of childhood, as they appear in her poems, are especially rich. In section 3 of the long poem "October" (*Nature* 55-59), Swenson recalls her father, whose thumb lacked a nail because it had been nicked by a saw:

Dad would pare the fruit from our
orchard in the fall, while Mother
boiled the jars, prepared for
"putting up." Dad used to darn
our socks when we were small,
and cut our hair and toenails.
Sunday mornings, in pajamas, we'd
take turns in his lap. He'd help
bathe us sometimes. (56)

This passage expresses the genuine affection Swenson felt for her father and recalls the family life of her childhood with nostalgia and warmth. Though the poem does not specifically identify the Mormon aspects of that childhood, they are suggested by the details Swenson includes—the family's special preparations for Sunday, and their attention to fruit preservation as part of a year's food supply. Furthermore, this poem in its entirety has a very religious feel to it. "I do not mean to pray," Swenson says in the poem's next section. "But I am glad for the luck / of light. Surely it is godly, / that it makes all things / begin, and appear, and become / actual to each other" (57). A Mormon reader is likely to associate Swenson's memories of her strong, loving

Mormon family in the third section with the yearning for religious expression she voices in the fourth.

"Under the Baby Blanket" (*In Other Words* 12-13) more directly considers Mormon life by examining a Mormon artifact. The poem is addressed to Swenson's companion Rozanne Knudson, and it is about a baby quilt Knudson's mother made as she awaited her daughter's birth. As the poem opens, forty-seven-year-old Knudson has just returned from a visit with her mother, who has given her the quilt. Swenson describes its "handstitched / and appliqued" panels with pictures of "12 identical sunbonneted / little girls, one in each square, in different / colors of dresses doing six different things" (12). Swenson admires the work and skill that went into making the quilt—"every tiny stitch put in with needle and / thimble," and attributes the quilting to "Relief Society ladies" (12). The quilt is described as a work of art and, more importantly, as a mother's blessing to her daughter. In the center panel of the quilt, the sunbonneted little girl reads a book with Rozanne's initial on the cover. Because Rozanne is also a writer, Swenson sees this quilt as "A Matriarchal Blessing, predicting [Rozanne's] future!" (12). Swenson may intend that statement jokingly, but making it at all indicates her familiarity with the tradition of patriarchal blessings and her freedom from the restraints of the contemporary Mormon culture that deny mothers the opportunity to give their children blessings. Swenson has said that many of her poems are "simultaneously serious and funny" (Hammond 71). In a small way, this poem offers a feminist cultural revision and celebrates the beauty and skill of Mormon women's quilt-making.

Affection for the Mormon past and reservations about the Mormon present also appear in the poem "Summerfall" (*In Other Words* 22), which describes the demolition by explosives of the old Hotel Newhouse in Salt Lake City. Swenson uses architecture to compare the dignity of purpose, the grace and graciousness of what she calls "an early, honest, work-proud era" with the proliferating Mormon materialism of the current generation. Of that earlier architecture and time, Swenson says, "All will be flattened. Graciousness, out of date, / must go, in instantaneous shock." Her prediction of the future, appearing a few lines later, has proven to be most

prophetic: "Prompt to come, ye Saints, / your condominiums, high-rise business, boosted / economy, new cash flow." Swenson's respect for her Mormon heritage didn't keep her from examining and judging the Mormon world as she saw it.

Swenson particularly finds fault with the current Mormon practice of unquestioning obedience to authority. In her poem "The Elect" (*In Other Words* 62) she criticizes the effects of such a system on those who are empowered by it:

Under the splendid chandeliers
the august heads are almost all
fragile, gray, white-haired or bald
against the backs of thronelike chairs.

They meet in formal membership
to pick successors to their seats,
having eaten the funeral meats,
toasted the names on the brass strips

affixed behind them, tier on tier,
on chairs like upright coffin tops.
When a withered old head drops,
up is boosted a younger's career.

The chamber is ancient and elite,
its lamps pour down a laureate gold.
Beyond the windows blue and cold
winter twilight stains the street,

as up from the river the wind blows
over slabs of a steep graveyard,
the names under snow. A last award:
to be elected one of those.

Most readers would identify this poem, with its skilled "In Memoriam" stanzas, as describing academia—an Ivy league school like Harvard, perhaps, which is located on the Charles River and is surrounded by very old churches and graveyards. But the poem's language and images suggest an alternative reading for a Mormon audience.

Swenson seems to have felt even more strongly about the way that unquestioned authority affects those who are subject to it. Several of her poems imply that, in the people on whom it is wielded,

strong authority, especially when combined with religious certainty, creates a rigid conformity that results in thoughtless obedience and a mindless mediocrity. Swenson's 1982 Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poem "Some Quadrangles" (*In Other Words* 71-76) is rather harsh in its discussion of her fellow students at Utah State. This poem compares the kind of students developed at various universities with the kind of quad available to those students. This is what Swenson says about Utah State:

We competed—check this!—
we competed to be good. Most of us did.

. . .

"Good student"

didn't mean brilliant scholar, original mind, or even eagerness to learn. It meant programmed to please—not so much our teachers, but mainly our peers. Our goal was to fit the mold that seemed assigned by those around us. We used our quad of perfectly barbered grass only for crossing from class to class. And we walked on the crosswalks while walking and crossing. Naturally, no foot should be set on the carpet. Might wear it out! I do remember how it smelled heavenly on dewy mornings after a mowing, which sometimes left unlopped the subversive heads of a dandelion or two. . . . (73-74)

The clipped lawn "smelled heavenly," but Swenson makes us wonder how heavenly it actually was. The image of the surviving dandelion heads is significant. I think Swenson must have considered herself one of those few dandelions whose head wasn't lopped off (in other words, who retained an independent mind despite strong pressure within the Mormon culture to conform). And the dandelions that didn't survive the mowing recall those whose authenticity is destroyed. The perfect quad, untouched by the feet of students who crossed it only at allowed crosswalks, is a metaphor for the Utah Mormon culture that requires such deference to authority and such conformity that it discourages excellence and originality. The advice to students with which Swenson ends this poem shows how strongly she reacted against that pressure to conform:

Listen, there's just one "Don't," one "Keep Off," one "Keep Away From"—and I don't mean "the Grass."

It is: *Don't be a clone*. Don't do what others do. Because what they do, they do because others do. . . . (75)

Swenson is not leading students to wild-eyed irresponsible abandon; she advises them to resist both liberal and conservative conformity:

Not to be robotic, fix-focused on that straight slit up the middle of some cat's eye. *Not* to be either knee-jerked or Lotus-folded into the annealed mob of spastic hot punk-rock clones, or else upstairs among the pawky cornball Majority Morals.

. . . .

Get up, get out on the fresh edge of things, away from the wow and flutter. Stand alone.
Take a breath of your own. Choose the wide-angle view. That's something, maybe, you can begin to learn to do . . . (76)

What Swenson advocates here is actually moral agency, a central principle of Mormon thought. It is one of life's ironies that her own exercise of that agency led her to examine Mormon culture and, while admiring some aspects of that culture (including the strong family life she herself benefitted from and the pioneer tradition of work and dignity), to criticize and reject aspects of the culture that she experienced as limiting.

Mormon Doctrine in Swenson's Poems

I began this study with the assumption that because Swenson was not a practicing Mormon, she would resist Mormon doctrines and that such resistance would appear in her poems. In other words, I thought Swenson's engagement with Mormon teachings would be primarily to oppose them. Indeed, I have found several poems that disparage basic practices or question prohibited behaviors. But more often Swenson seems not to have rejected Mormon concepts but to have considered them carefully. While her interpretation of these concepts cannot be considered orthodox, she reinvents them

in the philosophical questions she asks and answers in her poems.

To begin with what Swenson rejects, she seems to have been particularly annoyed with the Mormonism practiced by her mother, who, the poems indicate, was pious and rigorous in her observances. The poem "Nature" (*Nature* 78-79) says of Margaret Swenson, "Mother, eighty-one, fasted five days / and went to Temple. Mormon, her creed / eternal life, she fell / on the kitchen floor unconscious" (79). Swenson comments no more on her mother's actions, but the juxtaposition of her fasting, her temple attendance, and her belief in eternal life with her falling on the kitchen floor suggests some judgment against her piety, or at least implies that her excesses of piety are foolish. Another poem about Margaret Swenson's death, "That the Soul May Wax Plump" (*New and Selected* 51) repeats the criticism:

Mother's work before she died was self-purification,
a regimen of near starvation, to be worthy to go
to Our Father, Whom she confused (or, more aptly,
fused)
with our father, in Heaven long since. She believed
in evacuation, an often and fierce purgation,
meant to teach the body to be hollow, that the soul
may wax plump.

The irony of the poem is that, because of such rigorous denial of self, the most ecstatic moment of her mother's life was the moment when she died, which Swenson describes as almost orgasmic:

Throat and rectum
sang together, a galvanic spasm, hiss of ecstasy.
Then, a flat collapse. Legs and arms flung wide,
like that female Spanish saint slung by the ankles
to a cross, her mouth stayed open in a dark O. So,
her vigorous soul whizzed free. On the undertaker's
slab, she
lay, youthful, cool, triumphant, with a long smile.

Such abandon Swenson's mother seems to have experienced only in death, never in life. At the poem's beginning, Swenson calls her "My dumpy little mother" and says that when she is in her casket

"dressed / in Eden's green apron, organdy bonnet on" (that is, when she is back in the Church's control), "she shrank, grew short again, and yellow." This poem may reflect a tension between Swenson and her mother as much as between Swenson and Mormon doctrine, but there are many other poems with evidence of Swenson's resisting the religious strictures of Mormonism.

Swenson particularly rejects the imposition of religious behavior on her. In "Sunday in the Country" (*Nature* 24-25), for example, nature itself seems to require that Swenson worship. The poem is replete with religious (though not specifically Mormon) imagery attached to objects in the natural world. Swenson suffers from "The sun's incessant blessing," and "Sky, / deep and accusing in its blue" that "scrapes / [Swenson's] conscience like a nail" (24). She says, "Corporeal self's too shapeful for this manger. / I'm mesmerized by trumpet sun / funneling hallelujah to my veins" (24). In this poem, so far, Swenson is trapped, spellbound by the heaviness of religion, its weight and its guilt. That the "corporeal self" is unsuited to this worship service is telling; Swenson resents and resists the denial of appetite and body that religious life requires. She is relieved of the burdens of "worship" when

... at the tabernacle's back, a blurt
guffaw is heard. An atheistic stranger calls
a shocking word. That wakes the insurrection!

....
A black and
impudent Voltairean crow has spoiled
the sacrament. And I can rise and go. (24-25)

It is interesting that Swenson is released from the guilt of the religious experience by the noise of an unbeliever, "an atheistic stranger," a "Voltairean crow" that comes into the "tabernacle." If the religion is not true, one need not abide by its strictures against the pleasures of "the corporeal self."

I can't help but see this poem as Swenson's resistance to religious prohibitions against the expression of sexuality, and especially against homosexual sexuality. The poem "Her Early Work" (*In Other Words* 58) suggests some of the frustrations Swenson faced in her early life because of her sexual

orientation:

Talked to cats and dogs,
to trees, and to strangers.
To one loved, talked through
layers of masks.
To this day we can't know
who was addressed,
or ever undressed.

The poem speaks of "Wild and heathen scents / of shame or sin" that "hovered since childhood." These feelings account for Swenson's discomfort in the religious atmosphere of "Sunday in the Country." Two other poems can be interpreted to strongly oppose religious prohibitions that deny human sexual satisfaction and fulfillment. The first is "Wild Water" (*Love Poems* 48):

Insidious cruelty is this
that will allow the heart
a scent of wild water
in the arid land—
that holds out the cup
but to withdraw the hand.

Then says to the heart: Be glad
that you have beheld the font
where lies requitement,
and identified your thirst.
Now, heart, take up your desert;
this spring is cursed.

It is true that nothing in this poem directly connects it to the situation of a homosexual in the Mormon Church. The "wild water" may be a metaphor for any unreturned love. But it is a particularly poignant metaphor for the absolute desert offered to a gay or lesbian Mormon, who, feeling love and sexual attraction, must repress such feelings for his or her entire life in order to remain in the Church, without hope of any human sexual expression ever.

The second poem that questions the wisdom of denying the body's needs for sexual fulfillment is "Stone or Flame" (*Love Poems* 49). Echoing Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice," this poem asks about the costs of both sexual denial and sexual expression:

Shall we pray to be delivered
from the crying of the flesh
Shall we live like the lizard
in the frost of denial

Or shall we offer the nerve-buds
of our bodies
to be nourished (or consumed)
in the sun of love

Shall we wrap ourselves rigid
against desire's contagion
in sarcophagi of safety
insulate ourselves
from both fire and ice

To this point, the poem seems to favor sexual expression, as that alternative seems better than living like a lizard or wrapping oneself into a sarcophagus and may, the poem suggests, nourish rather than consume. But the rest of the poem seems quite evenhanded in expressing the pain of either choice:

And will the vessel of the heart
stay warm
if our veins be drained of passion
Will the spirit rise virile
from the crematory ash

Shall we borrow
from the stone
relentless peace
or from the flame
exquisite suicide?

That this poem doesn't offer a choice without life-threatening consequences also seems to connect it to the plight of a homosexual in the Mormon Church. There can be sexual expression without destruction for married heterosexual Mormons, so long as they express their sexuality with their marriage partner. Indeed, Mormon doctrine celebrates the body as essential in helping us to develop the characteristics of the Gods. But sexual expression for gay and lesbian Mormons (or, we are told, for any but those fortunate married heterosexual Mormons) will bring

destruction. It is interesting that the poem seems to affirm that such sexual activity is sinful by asking how it will affect the spirit. Burning is the poem's metaphor for sexual experience, and the poem asks: "Will the spirit rise virile / from the crematory ash?"

But this poem then emphasizes a truth generally omitted from Mormon sermons on proper sexual behavior: there is also a cost for denying the flesh, and that cost is, the poem tells us, a kind of dehumanization, to "live like the lizard / in the frost of denial," and to lose the warmth from one's heart. Neither choice for a gay or lesbian is happy; the "relentless peace" of the stone and the "exquisite suicide" of the flame are both metaphors for death. And from the official Mormon perspective, these are, tragically, the only options.

Despite these examples of resistance, Swenson's poetry more often considers than rejects major concepts of Mormon doctrine. In a 1978 interview she said:

I'm on a search, although I didn't deliberately set out to make a search in poetry. I have a philosophical bent which harks back to a religious background that I abandoned. Other poets may not be on any search other than into their own selves. But I've been on a search into the universe and the human mind. (Hammond 75)

The philosophical questions of Swenson's poetry are, in general, the questions about the purpose and meaning of life at the heart of the Mormon plan of salvation. In general, Swenson either affirms or in some way reinterprets Mormon doctrine as she answers those questions.

Swenson describes her search to understand the meaning of life. In "You Are" (*Love Poems* 41-43), she says:

once I thought
to seek the limits
of all being

I believed
in my own eyes' seeing
then

to find pattern purpose aim
thus forget death
or forgive it

If this poem is a true report, Swenson sets out to

find the meaning of human existence, which certainly is the basic question of any philosophical quest. But notice that she begins with the assumption that there is "pattern purpose aim," that life is not just a series of random, uncaused phenomena, and that a search can lead to understanding that will make death an acceptable part of life. It is likely that those assumptions come from Swenson's schooling in Mormon tenets, which affirm a purpose in human existence and an eternal pattern of life that make death a natural transition rather than a horrible annihilation and final separation.

The long poem "Banyan" from Swenson's final book, *In Other Words* (95-128), enacts the quest she describes in "You Are." The voice and major character of that poem is Tonto, a "coarse-haired Woolly Monkey" (104) who leaves his home in human society and goes to live in the banyan tree. Passage through the tree becomes a metaphor for passage through life, and Tonto is always trying to understand it. He says:

I had expected to turn a corner,
to find ahead, within range, a view
that would change the aspect of everything
so far seen and experienced—that would explain
everything, and show how it all combined as a
Whole.

....

"What and where is the purpose?" I persisted.
(115)

To believe or hope that life has "pattern purpose aim" almost presupposes a belief in God or some form of intelligence higher than the human, to which humans are trying to gain access in order to understand the meaning of their earthly experiences. Although Swenson rarely mentions God in them, she wrote many poems considering the limitations of human perception and suggesting that there may be greater systems humans don't have access to. "The Poplar's Shadow" (*Nature* 18), for example, is about Swenson's childhood memory of a poplar tree, the shadow of which she saw as "the quill of a great pen / dark upon the lawn." Now she sees the same shape in a pigeon's feather she finds in a city park, which discovery causes her to wonder:

Starting at here,
and superposing then,
I wait for when.
What shapes will appear?
Will great birds swing
over me like gongs?
The poplar plume belongs
to what enormous wing?

The poem "Flying Home from Utah" (*Nature* 175-77) expresses a similar theme. As Swenson's plane climbs, she sees fields as "fitted pieces of a floor, / tan and green tiles that get smoother, smaller, the higher we fly" (175), lakes as "Heel-shaped dents of water" (175), and hills as "rubbed felt, crumpled bumps / of antlers pricking from young bucks' heads" (176). The change in her perception as she climbs causes her to reflect, in "the room of [her] mind" (176), on

A sprawled leaf, many-fingered, its radial
ridges limber, green—but curled,
tattered, pocked, the brown palm

nibbled by insects, nestled in by worms:
One leaf of a tree that's one tree of a forest,
that's the branch of the vein of a leaf

of a tree. (176-77)

The transformation of the forest tree to a tiny capillary of a leaf again suggests to Swenson that humans are limited to comprehend only what is within our own system and that there may be greater systems beyond our knowledge or comprehension. The ending of the poem uses language that recalls Mormon scripture:

. . . Perpetual worlds
within, upon, above the world, the world
a leaf within a wilderness of worlds. (177)

This passage of poetry sounds much like the passage of Mormon scripture in which God speaks to Moses in the Pearl of Great Price: "And worlds without number have I created; and I also created them for mine own purpose; . . . For behold, there are

many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man; but all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them" (Moses 1:33, 35). In both "The Poplar's Shadow" and "Flying Home from Utah," Swenson creates metaphors that suggest greater realms. Particularly when one considers the similar language, it seems reasonable to look for the source of Swenson's speculations in her Mormon religious background.

Swenson also calls for humans to try to achieve a change in perspective that will allow a different vision. In a poem whose title is also its first line, she says,

LET US PREPARE
to get beyond the organic
for surely there is something else
to which it is an impediment an opaque
pod
What if it is sight that blinds
hearing that deafens
touch that makes us numb?
(*New and Selected* 221)

This poem is indented on the left to create a white space that looks like some angled surface—a train or an arrow, perhaps—forcing its way through the words. The poem, which has an oracular tone, ends with the admonition: "Let us prepare to bare ourselves outside the gibbet-hood / of the world / without excuse of flesh or apology of blood." Again, the assumptions on which this poem is based fit well with Mormon doctrine—that human reasoning and sensory observation are both inadequate to a transcendent understanding and that greater knowledge may be available to us beyond this life. The poem suggests that if we could get beyond our mortal limitations, more knowledge would be available.

A very interesting poem that actually enacts the changes of perception called for in "Let Us Prepare" is the poem "The Surface" (*Nature* 198):

First I saw the surface,
then I saw it flow,
then I saw the underneath.

In gradual light below

I saw a kind of room,
the ceiling was a veil,

a shape swam there
slow, opaque and pale.
I saw enter by a shifting corridor

other blunt bodies
that sank toward the floor.
I tried to follow deeper

with my avid eye.
Something changed the focus:
I saw the sky,

a glass between inverted trees.
Then I saw my face.
I looked until a cloud

flowed over that place.
Now I saw the surface
broad to its rim,

here gleaming, there opaque
far out, flat and dim.
Then I saw it was an Eye:

I saw the Wink that slid
from underneath the surface
before it closed its lid.

This poem, which is, of course, about a lake or pond with fish in it, registers several different "realms" that Swenson perceives as she observes. First she sees the entire lake as a lake—the surface of things. Then she realizes that the lake is flowing, moving, and that she can see beneath the surface. In describing what is below the surface, "a kind of room," it may be coincidence that Swenson uses terms that have particular meaning to Mormons, but perhaps not. The room's ceiling is a veil, an apt metaphor to describe the juncture of water and sky. But in Mormon terms, we speak of "the veil being thin" when we feel in communication with God or departed loved ones, and we speak of death as "passing through the veil." And although Swenson did not go through the temple, she may have

imagined it in her description of the "kind of room" with a veil for a ceiling, and in which she saw "a shape" swim, "slow, opaque and pale" and "other blunt bodies" that entered "by a shifting corridor."

The third realm the poem creates is the reflection of the sky and Swenson's own face on the surface. This has the effect of again changing and broadening the perspective by which Swenson sees and also including her in all the systems the poem has created. Then the poem concludes with a transcendent change in perception—that lake becomes an Eye with a capital E. Could that Eye recall the all-seeing eye above the doors of the Salt Lake Temple and present in so much early Mormon art and architecture? The all-seeing eye, like Swenson's "Eye," is a symbol of God. That Swenson's Deity is playful enough to "Wink" seems a fitting touch. She would certainly perceive God as having a sense of humor as fine as her own.

To summarize, this poem shows how a change in perception allows one to enter a variety of different realms (or systems), and that by altering our perceptions to understand each system, we have a greater possibility of reaching the vision of God (that is, both an awareness of God and an ability to see as God sees). The poem compares rather convincingly with the Mormon doctrine of eternal progression—that humans are capable of growing and progressing to become like God, that there are "estates" to pass through in this process of growth, and that one's understanding will increase as one learns—and learns to abide by the laws of each system.

Considering Swenson's re-invention of the doctrine of eternal progression, it is not surprising that her poems also show interest in the continuation of life and growth after death. In "Camping in Madera Canyon" (*Nature* 118-20), she says, "Night hid this day. What sunrise may it be / the dark to? What wider light ripens to dawn / behind familiar light?" (119-20). Owls in this poem are given a sort of angelic identity; Swenson tells us that Apaches believed owls to be the ghosts of their ancestors. The poem ends:

The whiskered owls are here, close by,
in the tops of the pines, invisible and radiant,

as we, blind and numb, awaken—our just-born
eyes and ears, our feet that walk—
as brightness bathes the road. (120)

The implication is that the humans of the poem, newly born, just coming into the "life" of the new day, don't yet have the capacity to see the owls, although the owls are nearby, but that this day might be night to a greater day in which they will learn to see the owls.

The same impetus drives the poem "Nature" (*Nature* 78-79), which, as we have already considered, is about the death of Swenson's mother. The poem imagines death as "a large gut" swallowing us slowly "Until the last sink, where mouth says, / 'Here's a Mouth!'" (78). But the poem goes on to review a film Swenson has recently seen of a birth. Swenson describes the birth as a "wet head, twisting free / of a vomiting Mouth" (79). Thus, the mouth of birth and the mouth of death may be the same mouth. Death may simply swallow us here and spew us out elsewhere in another birth.

Both of these poems can be seen as metaphoric representations of the Mormon doctrine of eternal progression. The well-known Mormon epigram says, "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become." Such a close connection between humans and Deity, such a spur always to seek knowledge and growth must have been important to May Swenson; I find these to be the Mormon doctrines that entered her being and became her own.

I conclude by returning to the poem "Banyan" (*In Other Words* 95-128), the last poem in the last book Swenson published during her lifetime. Tonto the monkey travels through the banyan with a cockatoo named Blondi, whose talk is mostly to recite passages of literature she's learned in the library where she lives, and, in addition, to repeat what she's heard people say. Blondi ends the poem by reciting her answer to Tonto's question:

The purpose of life is
To find the purpose of life
To find the purpose
Of life is
The purpose

Life is
To find (128)

This seems to be Swenson's final message, the truth by which she lived her life. Though it may sound like circular reasoning, it is based on the assumption that one's search for the purpose of life will be rewarding. "Life is / To find." Such hope, such faith, must have been instilled in Swenson by her Mormon training, where she learned that humans "are that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25) and that "all . . . things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7).

Knowing the Poetry First: A Response Paul Swenson

I told people who asked the same story for a lot of years, which was that my sister May left for New York the year I was born. Then, for some reason, I heard an alternative explanation and switched to the story that she left when I was three. So I was glad to learn from Susan's paper that it *was* the year I was born. She does her research. I asked her yesterday, "How did you know that 'Under the Baby Blanket' was written to Rozanne (Zan) Knudsen? You must have talked to some people about that." She said, "I read the poem and I figured it out." Susan reads the poems and she figures it out.

Her analysis for the most part, in my opinion, is on target in amazing ways. It gets underneath the surface of stuff that connects with aspects of May's poetry that I've thought about but also opens up another layer of May and her poetry. To respond to her analysis is really a pleasure for me.

I didn't get to know May personally very well until I was older; I knew her poetry first, a strange but wonderful way to get to know your sister. I realized when I was fairly young that reading her poetry made me feel the way some people say reading scripture should make you feel—but which worked for me only on rare occasions. So Susan's point that there really are deep spiritual connections in May's work is something I felt very early. Susan makes the point in commenting on one poem that

it has a religious "feel." May not only didn't consider herself a Mormon, but she also did not consider herself religious. She might have been able to live with the word *spiritual* on some level. Her poetry does have deep spiritual connotations. Whether you believe in an afterlife or a God, I think May felt her connection with the spirit in a very strong way.

I'm really grateful for Susan's selection of poems to concentrate on. "Some Quadrangles," the Phi Beta Kappa poem she wrote in 1982, is one of my favorites. It's long and difficult, but well worth reading in *New and Selected Things Taking Place*, unfortunately no longer in print. However, May's collected works will be available soon, I'm told. "Banyan," that epic poem in *In Other Words*, which is still in print, is another favorite. It was interesting that Susan saw "The Elect" as dealing with General Authorities seated in those red chairs in the Tabernacle. It could mean many things, but that's certainly one of the possibilities.

I'd like to respond to a number of points in Susan's paper where I find myself in disagreement about her interpretation, even though I can see that the poem can indeed support Susan's reading. For example, I think May's relationship with her mother—our mother—was a complicated one; however, I don't believe she was "annoyed" by her mother's piety. I think May was interested in it in the same profound way she was interested in anything that came across her path.

"Nature" is an amazing poem. As Susan says, it begins in a hospital: "I slept in her bed. / Inside a stomach as great as the planet. . . [I think we're entering a dream world here.] quagmire ground in gray movement . . . / mucous membrane, rugous, reached my foot / . . . sucked one leg to the crotch . . ." It goes on to the point Susan quoted about the mouth, but I'd like to call your attention to a couple of things later in the poem.

Here's another way to look at what the poem could be about: She slept in her mother's bed while her mother was in the hospital. Essentially, she slept in her mother's body in her dream consciousness, felt perhaps her own birth, the earth's birth, her mother's impending death, and something bigger being born. But notice the last stanza in which she is the mother to her mother in hospital.

One bud-nipped bloom I took to her hospital bed.
Her mouth woke to its dew. This time,
it woke. . . . Last night I slept in her bed.

In "That the Soul May Wax Plump," which is also about May's mother's death, what I see, in both it and "Nature," is not so much May playing out some kind of tension with her mother as simply a brutal honesty about aging, death, all of those things that none of us want to think about—and May thought about them. In her poetry, thinking aloud changed those things and changed them spiritually.

In "My Name Was Called," which is about her childhood and receiving an honorary degree at her alma mater late in life, May does the same thing with her own face. Surprised by a huge TV image of her face, she shrinks from it and describes it in brutally honest terms. She does the same thing in "Feel Me," which is about her father's death. "Feel me, and emulate / my state, / for I am becoming less dense— / I am feeling right / for the first time." Up to that point, something very strong and positive is happening. And then "the vessel burst, / and we were kneeling around an emptiness." She confronts death, looks it in the face, looks her father's death in the face as she did her mother's and sees both the absolute horror of the situation and the change that comes in writing about it, a change which transforms the entire experience.

In "Summer in the Country," which Susan commented on, the phrase, "I'm mesmerized by trumpet sun / funneling hallelujah to my veins," she feels the experience in that grove in the country. She can appreciate both the hallelujah chorus and the "blurt guffaw" of the crow. It appeals to her sense of humor. It's like the child in church sticking out her tongue; we find ourselves smiling appreciatively because it's something that is funny, something that isn't done in church.

Now I'd like to read two poems. The first is "The Shape of Death." I like it for a number of reasons, not the least because of what's packed into it: myth, science, alchemy. It takes place in a cloud, in the sea, in the earth, at Mount Palomar, and, ultimately, in that most spiritually challenging and sentimentality-tempting place for the modern poet, the human heart. It is a shaped poem. You have to

hop a chasm to get to the end of every line. You can try reading it just down the left or down the right, but it doesn't work. You have get across the space in the middle.

What does love look like? We know the shape of death.

Death is a cloud, immense and awesome. At first a lid is lifted from the eye of light. There is a clap of sound. A white blossom belches from the jaw of fright. A pillared cloud churns from white to gray like a monstrous brain that bursts and burns—then turns sickly black, spilling away, filling the whole sky with ashes of dread. Thickly it wraps, between the clean seas and the moon, the earth's green head. Trapped in its cocoon, its choking breath, we know the shape of death. Death is a cloud. What does love look

like? Is it a particle, a star, invisible entirely beyond the microscope and Palomar? a dimension past

the length of hope? Is it a climate far and fair that we shall never dare discover? What is its color and its alchemy? Is it a jewel in the earth? can it be dug? Or dredged from the sea? Can it be bought? Can it be sown and harvested? Is it a shy beast to be caught? Death is a cloud

—immense, a clap of sound. Love is little and not loud. It nests within each cell, and it cannot be split. It is a ray, a seed, a note, a word, a secret motion of our air and blood. It is not alien—it is near—our very skin, a sheath to keep us pure of fear. (New and Selected 100)

The second poem is "I Look at My Hand," which is about her parents and herself and, in a way, about how a Heavenly Father might operate in dropping us into this world.

I look in my hand and see
it is also his and hers;
the pads of the fingers his,
the wrists and knuckles hers.
In the mirror my pugnacious eye
and ear of an elf, his;

my tamer mouth and slant
cheekbones hers.
His impulses my senses swarm,
her hesitations they gather.
Father and Mother
who dropped me,

an acorn in the wood,
repository of your shapes
and inner streams and circles,

you who lengthen toward heaven,
forgive me
that I do not throw

the replacing green
trunk when you are ash.
When you are ash, no
features shall there be
tangled of you,
interlacing hands and faces

through me
who hide, still hard,
far down under your shades—

and break my root, and prune my buds,
that what can make no replica
may spring from me.
(New and Selected 98)

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